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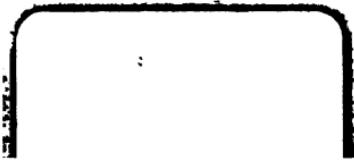
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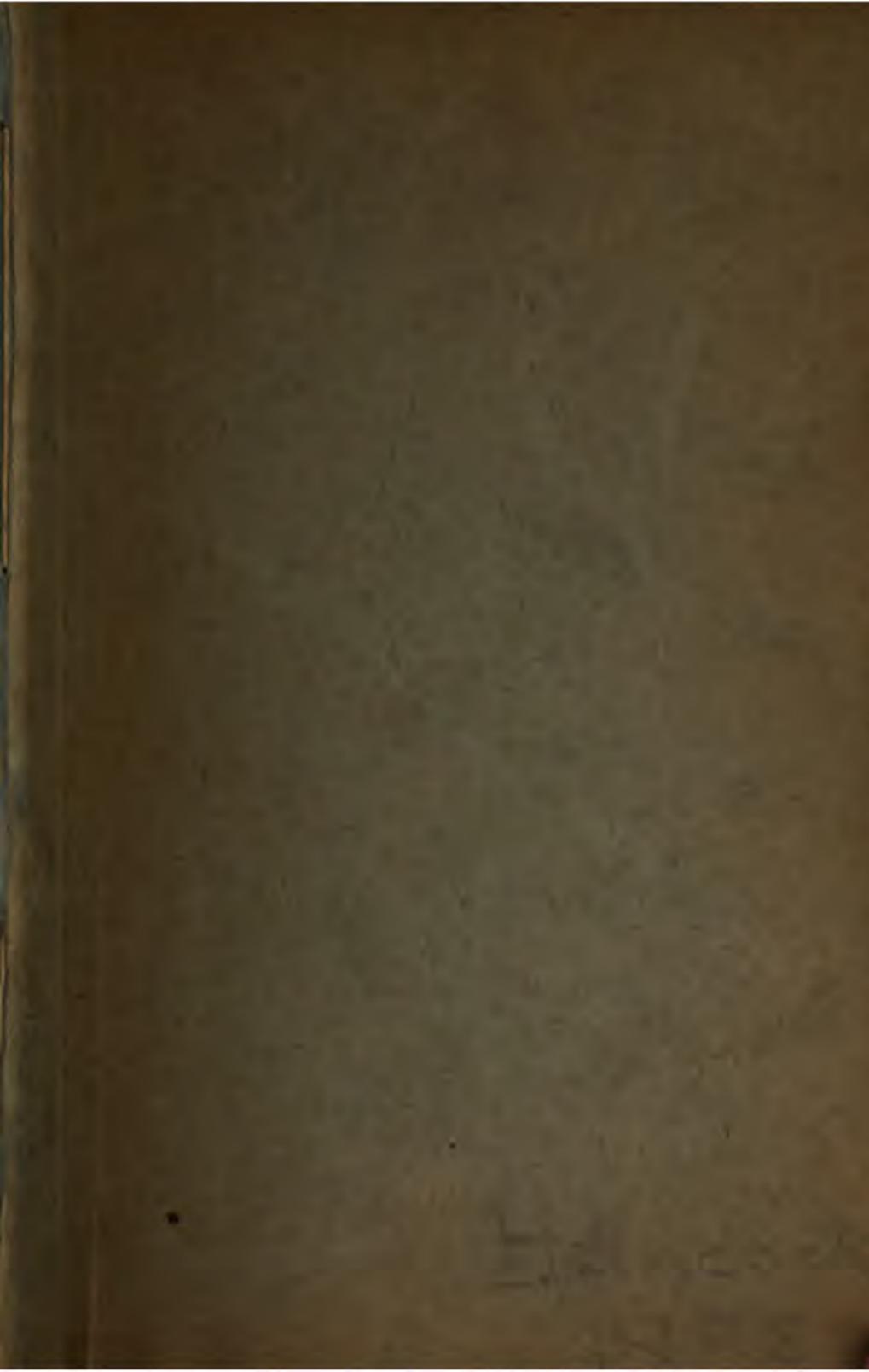
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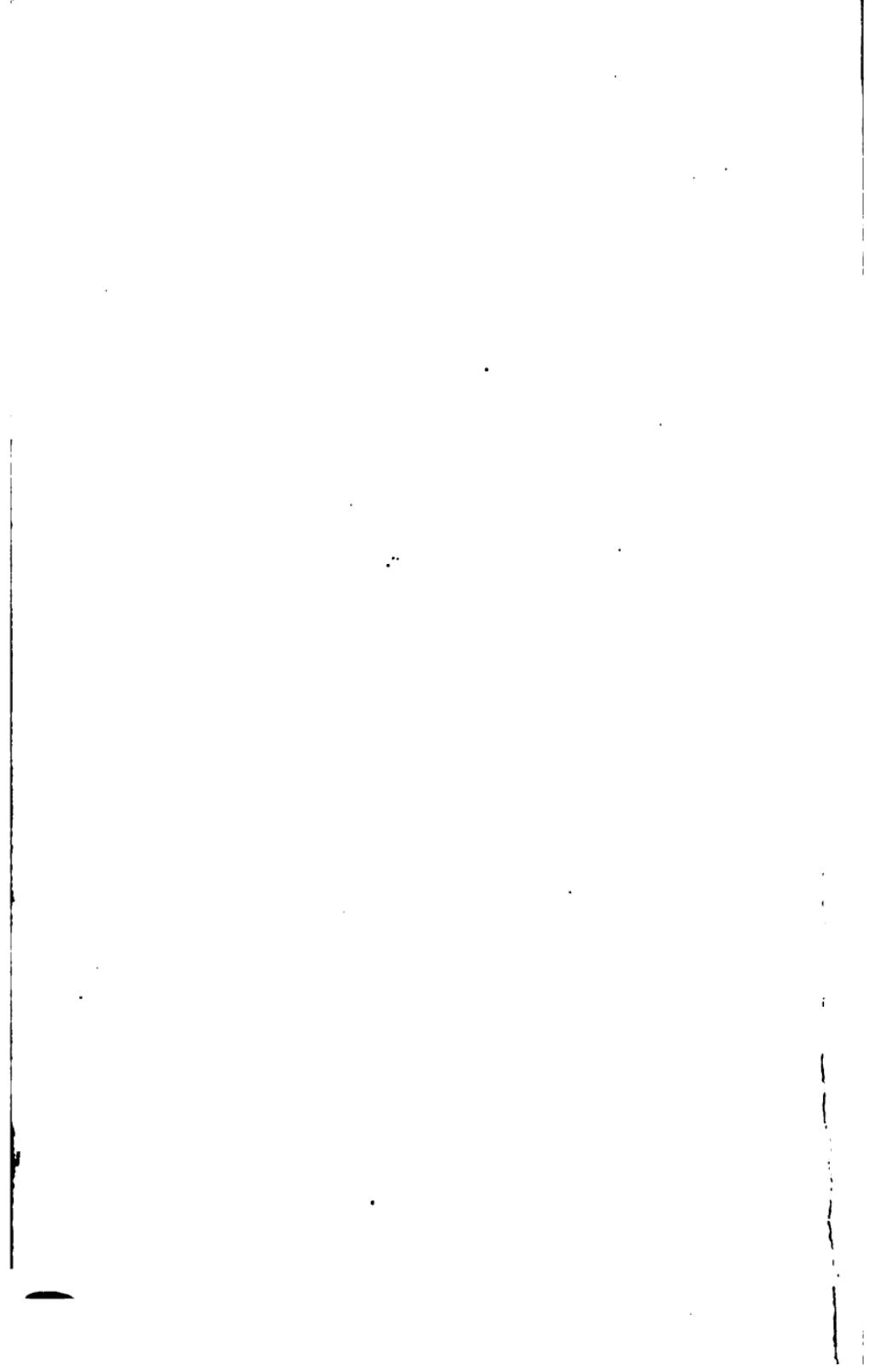
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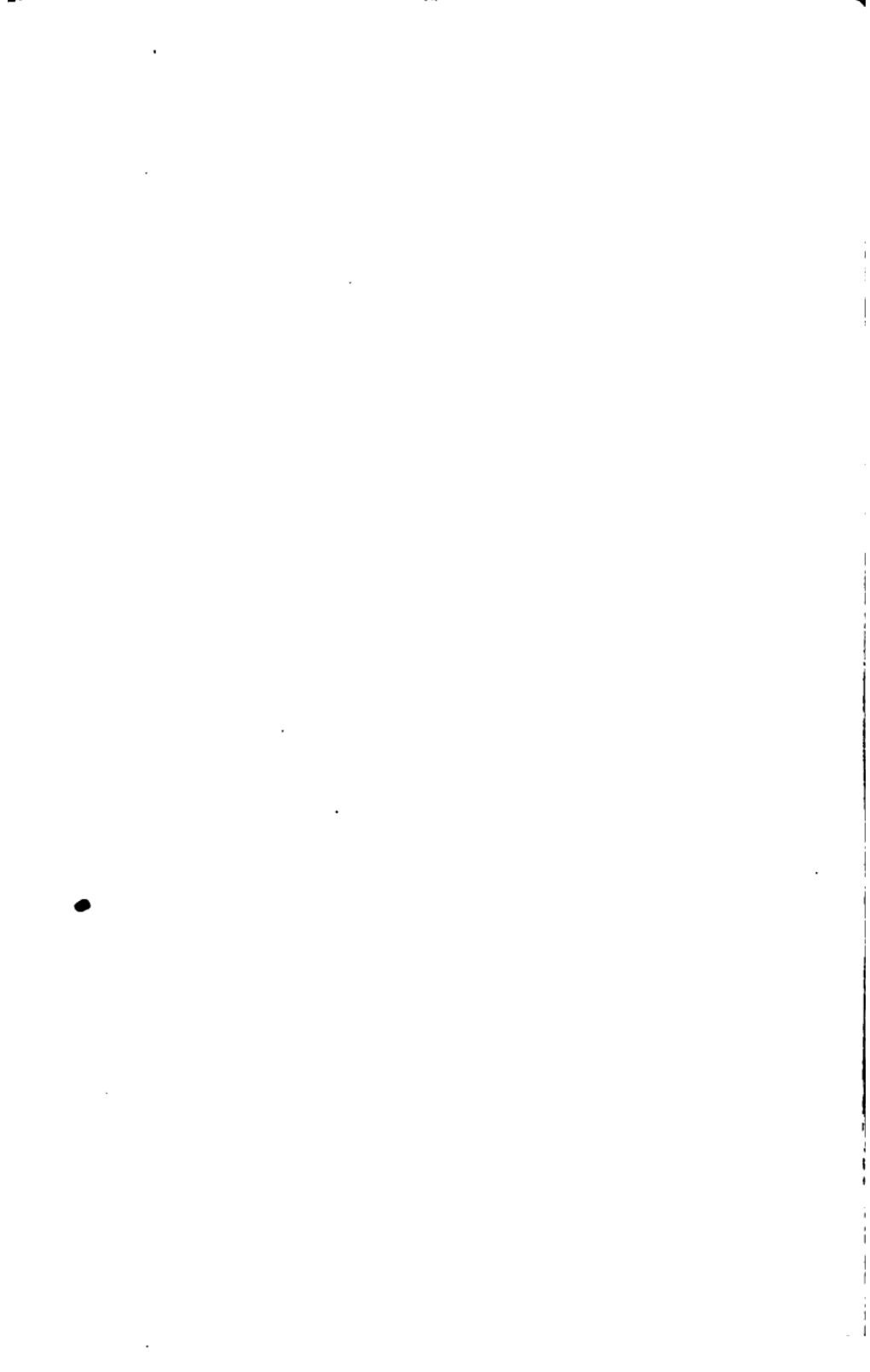
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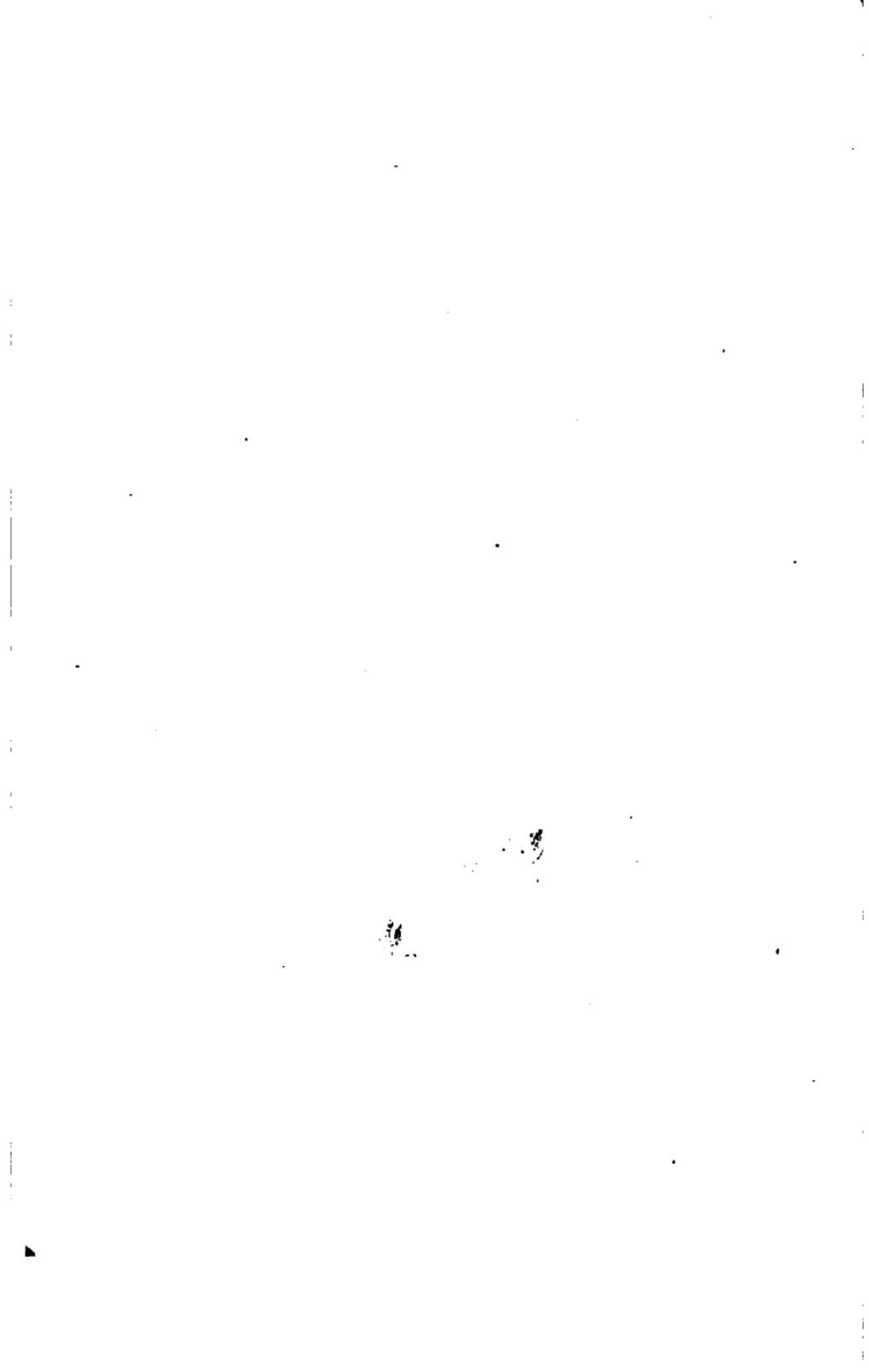
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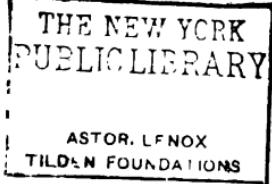














"'You've got over your bad streak, sir.'"

[Page 146]

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BOUNTYVILLE BOYS

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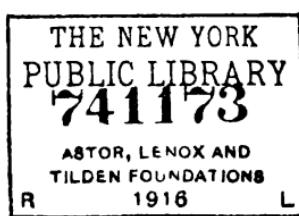
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BOUNTYVILLE BOYS

CHAPTER I

A BOUNTYVILLE PLAYDAY

Cr-B-BACK! pop! pop! pop! *Bang!*

What a racket that was! First, the rippling fire of a few rifles, followed by some solitary shots, and then the crash of a solid volley. It was a generous, hearty, wholesome racket of the kind that sets all the warm blood in one's veins dancing. It was a racket that suggested valorous hearts, steady nerves, and noble deeds performed under a good old Flag!

No wonder that the horse toiling up the hill—not being a creature of sentiment—shied at the rattling din, giving the older of the two men in the buggy, for a moment, all he could do to prevent a bolt.

“Gracious! What is that?” demanded the younger man, as the firing kept furiously on and was answered by other volleys from a greater distance.

“Battle!” laughed Squire Hosford. “Not the first time you’ve heard that sound, eh?”

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"No; I was under fire for a few days at Santiago," answered Dr. Stiles. "What's going on yonder? Militia practice?"

From just beyond the crest of the hill the rapid rifle fire still rippled out unceasingly. It was a sound that was good to hear.

"Militia?" repeated the squire. "Not much! That's our greatest local institution you're listening to—the Bountyville boys. They're at it in earnest to-day. I knew this affair was coming off, so I drove you up this way on purpose."

By this time the horse was under easy control again. Seeing Dr. Stiles's gaze fixed inquiringly upon him, the lawyer laughed good-naturedly as he went on:

"It's all the doings of Hiram Page, the man I'm taking you to see. He owns the great tool works here; is the wealthy man of the place, and is the greatest friend that American boys ever had. You see, he was all wrapped up in his boy, Paul, a splendid young fellow just past eighteen when he died, a little over a year ago. Of course Page grieved fearfully over his loss, but the more he got to thinking of what he would have done for that boy, the more he came to believe that it was his great duty to do everything that could be done for other boys."

"And so—?"

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"The idea that took root in his brain was to get together all the brightest boys in this town, found a school for them where they should be trained along the most advanced ideas, and devote individual attention to fitting each boy in the most thorough manner for the kind of a career for which he seemed best adapted. Knowing that the military appeals to boys more strongly than anything else, he decided to have a school run on the military plan. He built a brick armory with schoolrooms attached. He has about eighty boys, divided into two companies, and you never saw such fine soldiers as these youngsters are. They call Hiram Page 'Old Man Bounteous' in this town, for he is doing everything for our youngsters that money can accomplish. A good many of the people are talking of petitioning the Legislature for leave to change the name of the place to Bountyville. Oh, you should see how the boys love Page—and no wonder! But there they are!"

As the buggy reached the crest of the hill, Dr. Stiles gazed with the greatest interest at the lively scene before them.

Across a broad field a trench had been dug. Kneeling in the trench were some forty boys ranging in age from fourteen to seventeen or eighteen. Each one was clad in suit of khaki cloth, with leggings and sombrero, all of the approved regular

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army pattern. Around the waist of each was a well-filled ammunition belt. At the knees of each young soldier lay a stuffed-out haversack, ready to be resumed as soon as the word came to move. Each boy was provided with a canteen of water.

It being in the early part of summer, and the heat of the sun not oppressive, many of the boys had thrown aside their sombreros, acting in this with true soldierly instinct from the desire to show as little of themselves as possible to "the enemy." Crouching in the trench, hugging its top, these youngsters were exposing themselves just sufficiently to be able to sight and fire at another line of boys, all but invisible, who crouched in another trench some six hundred yards away.

Only the officers, the captains and two lieutenants of each company occasionally stood up. They, peering through field glasses, watched each visible motion of the enemy with as much anxiety as if this were real war.

"Keep closer to the ground, Filson!" warningly called one of these young officers, a splendid-looking, light-haired young Saxon on whose shoulders were the double-barred straps of a captain. "If you expose yourself so recklessly you'll get hurt. I can't spare any of my command needlessly. Potter, you're *too* careful. You don't raise your head enough to get good aim. Remember that it is a

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principle of fighting to make every shot reach one of the enemy if possible."

Having delivered these two rebukes, the young captain glanced at a trumpeter who lay on the ground, making the musician a sign with one hand. In an instant the clear, loud notes of "Cease firing!" rang out, and the firing died sputteringly.

"Crouch low, men!" sang out the young captain. "When you're not firing, you don't want to show even a hair of your heads."

In another moment the firing from the opposite trench had died out also. It was one of those lulls in hostilities that are so welcome to real soldiers.

"That's Tom Tallant," said Squire Hosford, indicating the young commander. "He's the brightest boy Old Man Bounteous has. He's senior captain of the battalion. And here comes the major."

From a hollow in the ground where he had been lying, a man of about thirty, in the uniform of a lieutenant of artillery rose and sauntered toward the buggy, nodding in a friendly way to the squire as he drew near. He was introduced to the interested stranger as Lieutenant Houston, of the Regular Army. This officer had been detailed by the United States Government, at Mr. Page's request, to serve as military instructor to the Bountyville

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boys. He acted as major in command of the battalion.

"This, being Saturday, is a playday," the lieutenant smilingly informed the doctor. "It's a sham battle, but the boys are as absorbed in it as if it were in deadly earnest. Are they not a fine-looking lot of youngsters?"

They certainly were, and Dr. Stiles admitted it with a good deal of warmth.

"I've had them about a year," resumed Houston, "and they drill and obey like regulars. Add two or three years to the ages of these boys, and I wouldn't ask anything better than to lead them in a real campaign."

"Hullo! What are they up to now?" inquired Squire Hosford, as a dozen scattering shots rang out from the farther trench. The on-looking trio saw four boys of Captain Tallant's command crawl over the parapet, and go wriggling, snakelike, in scouting fashion, toward the enemy's works. Promptly enough these daring ones had been espied by the enemy, and sharpshooters were aiming at them. At every few yards the wriggling scouts stopped to fire, too, while a brisk fusillade from the men under Captain Tallant covered this bold forward move.

"What are they up to?" repeated the squire.

"I'm not certain that I know," replied Lieutenant

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ant Houston. "It's probably some new piece of strategy that Captain Tallant has evolved. He's a first-rate officer, and a scheming one."

Just then something more than a dozen boys, under the leadership of the first lieutenant, wriggled off back of the near-by trench, moving in such a way that the enemy could not see them. They were quickly lost to view. Lieutenant Houston followed them with his eyes as long as they remained in sight. It was evident that the Regular Army officer had formed a sudden suspicion of what Captain Tallant's new evolution meant.

For some minutes after that all interest centered in the four scouts between the opposing lines. They were advancing slowly and cautiously, their khaki-clad bodies barely visible at two hundred yards. The fusillade was brisk at all times now—furious at moments. Dr. Stiles, with remembrances of his brief campaign in Cuba, glowed with the excitement of the thing.

"These boys are miniature copies of the splendid men I saw storm the heights at El. Caney," he cried. "They'll do just as noble work when their time comes—if it does, which Heaven forbids!"

"It's a good thing they're using blank cartridges, instead of ball ammunition," laughed Houston. "There'd be a terrific slaughter if this were

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a real fight, for many of these boys are already good marksmen."

"They sometimes *do* fire ball cartridges, then?" asked Dr. Stiles.

"Every school day, when the weather is favorable, each boy is required to fire three rounds at target. You can't see the range from here. There are some clever shots among the boys, for Mr. Page rightly says that there's no use in having soldiers who don't know how to shoot."

"This school of Mr. Page's is intensely military, isn't it?"

"Intensely practical," replied Houston, with a good deal of warmth. "Don't you know that in a regiment of soldiers about every kind of ability is represented? Let me give you an idea of how we work. Some of the boys are trained in signal corps work. They are studying signaling with flags, and also telegraphy. When they grow up and look for work, their training and inclinations will make telegraphers of them. There's their future work cut out. We have a dynamo, electric wires, telephones, and that sort of thing at the armory. All the work is being done by two boys, who are fitting themselves to become expert electricians. There is a good deal of printing required at the school. It is all done by three boys who are learning that trade. We have a hospital corps in connection with the bat-

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talion. That means that the four boys who serve in that way will become either trained nurses or physicians. We have budding machinists, steam and civil engineers, draughtsmen, writers, lawyers, chemists. There isn't a boy in the lot who, besides getting a first-class education, isn't fitting himself for some future calling. Mr. Page wouldn't have a boy in the outfit who wasn't anxious to fit himself now for the calling of his life. There's young Tallant. He's going to be a civil engineer. His second lieutenant, Ruhlman, is already in analytical chemistry. I could go on and tell you the work that every boy in either company is mastering. And with it all we have the military system, which makes these boys the best possible citizens in time of war, and which, in time of peace, teaches them orderliness, system, obedience, and fits them to command. I tell you, doctor, it's the grandest system of training boys that man ever invented. And yet Mr. Page spends no more money on his grand hobby than some people would in pottering around Europe."

"He must be a grand old man, this Mr. Page," said Dr. Stiles, his face glowing with some of the reflected enthusiasm of the army lieutenant.

"Hullo! There it goes! By Jove, that's a good one!" cried Houston, holding his field glass up to his eyes. "Henderson, with his detachment, worked

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around to the right of the enemy's trench, unobserved, and before they knew what had happened he began pouring a raking fire right down into their trench. That's what the scouts are for. You see, they're coming back now. They were just to keep the attention turned this way. Captain Tallant, that was a splendid flanking operation. I congratulate you."

"Thank you, sir," replied Captain Tom, his eyes flashing brightly as the army officer grasped his hand.

"The fight's over, I guess," smiled Houston. "The enemy must be vanquished now. Raise the signal flag, and we'll call the battle off for this afternoon."

Hardly had the flag been displayed when the firing from the distant trench died out. Just a few moments later, the enemy, Company B of the battalion, came marching over the grass in column of fours. They were dusty, powder-stained, smoke-grimed, and perspiring, but they moved with the swing of veteran soldiers, carrying their still hot rifles at a jaunty angle over the shoulder.

"Halt!" commanded their captain, and then ordered them to break ranks. In an instant the late enemies were fraternizing in the most amiable manner, while Lieutenant Houston, drawing the six

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young officers aside, praised some of their late work, criticising other bits of it.

"Form your battalion, after a minute or two more, Captain Tallant," then ordered their instructor. "We'll go to the armory, and there dismiss for the day."

Captain Tom saluted and stepped away. Houston came back to the buggy. The three men were talking, and did not see exactly what was happening until they heard a nettled voice exclaim:

"Oh, come, now, Tom Tallant, I don't care a continental whether you like my appearance or not."

It was the second lieutenant of B company who had spoken.

"Lieutenant Barron," said Tom firmly, "that's not the proper way to address your superior officer."

"My *superior*?" repeated Barron sneeringly. "Come, I like that! Why, your father is nothing but a lathe-tender in Page's factory. My father is a man of wealth and consequence, and you want to stop this way of lording it over me. You put on altogether too many airs for a laborer's son."

"That's Phil Barron, son of the man who owns the woolen mill," said Houston in an undertone to Dr. Stiles. The latter had expected to see the army officer interfere, but Houston did nothing of the sort.

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Tom Tallant, however, had turned very white under this insult, delivered in the hearing of all the boys.

"Lieutenant Barron," he replied, with twitching lips, after a brief pause to get full control of himself, "you are guilty of gross insubordination—one of the worst of military offenses. I will give you thirty seconds in which to make an apology."

"Might just as well give me thirty years," jibed Phil. "I won't apologize to any snipe like you."

"Lieutenant Barron, you are under arrest, and I shall prefer charges against you for court-martial. Be good enough to deliver your sword to me."

"If you want it, come and take it!" cried Phil, turning red, and drawing his sword as he backed away.

There was a dangerous look in Tom's face for just a brief instant.

Then, turning, he ordered, calmly:

"Sergeant Carroll, take four men. Use just as little violence as possible, but deprive Lieutenant Barron of his sword."

"Yes; come and get it!" snarled Phil defiantly, making rapid sweeps with the sword about his head as five of the boys started forward to obey their captain's command.

If Phil was angry and desperate enough to be

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careless of whether he hurt any of the squad, the five boys were equally determined to get that sword, no matter what happened. Discipline was the strongest feature in the management of the Bountyville battalion.

Two of them approached Phil in front. The other three moved in his rear. It was quite impossible for the mutinous one to carry out his defiance against these tactics. There was a rush, a scuffle, a scream of anger, and then Phil, rumpled and angrier than ever, rose without his sword, which rested in Carroll's hand.

"Here it is, sir," reported the sergeant, saluting his captain.

"Keep it, sergeant, until we get to the armory," directed Captain Tom, returning the salute. "Lieutenant Barron, if you march with us, it will be under arrest."

"I'd see you all hanged, before I'd march under arrest," raged Phil, tears of anger coming to his eyes.

Turning on his heel, Captain Tom shouted the order, "Fall in!" While fours were being counted in battalion front, and Phil Barron stood looking sullenly on, Tom approached Lieutenant Houston, saluting, and inquiring in a low voice:

"Sir, did I do right?"

"Just right," rejoined Houston with emphasis.

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"When we reach the armory, you will see me at once about drawing up charges in writing."

Saluting, Tom turned, maneuvered his battalion into column of fours, halted, and looked at Houston. Receiving a signal from the latter, he gave the order in a loud, clear voice:

"Forward, route step, march!"

Away tramped the battalion, in high spirits over the afternoon's work, Squire Hosford and Dr. Stiles following in the buggy. There was a jingling of accoutrements, and the steady whump, whump, whump! of marching feet as the column moved over the dusty road. Dr. Stiles, as he watched the young soldiers, thought of the old days in Cuba until the glisten in his eyes was replaced by the dimness of tears.

All by himself, fists tightly clenched, and tears of rage and mortification in his eyes, Phil Barron stood still for a long time gazing wrathfully after the moving line. He was aware that few of the boys sympathized with him in the military disgrace that had overtaken him. He knew his lack of popularity, even if he wondered at it.

"Oh, Tom Tallant, don't I hate you for this?" choked the humiliated one. "Just you wait, though! There'll come a day when I'll be even with you for this! I'm the bitterest enemy, now, that you're ever likely to have!"

CHAPTER II

THE ART OF OBEDIENCE

THERE was a smile of settled content on the face of old Hiram Page as he sat behind the highly polished flat-top desk in his library. Spread before him were the various reports from the teachers in the school he had founded for the boys of Westmont. First he scanned the reports of the progress of the different pupils, then ran his glance over the statement of expenses.

"Pooh!" he reflected. "The cost is a mere bagatelle for a man of my income. Why can't other men with large fortunes see the beauty of doing the same thing for other American boys?"

He turned as he heard a knock at the door. One of the servants entered, announcing:

"Mr. Barron would like to see you, sir."

"Show him in at once," directed Mr. Page. Leaning back in his chair with eyes on the door, he had not long to wait before his caller entered. James Barron, proprietor of the woolen mills in Westmont, was a man of fewer years than Mr.

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Page, a man who had traveled and seen much, and who had studied the art of getting along agreeably with other folks as long as it suited his purpose so to do. He was generally able to please when he so wished. There was an expression of the greatest cordiality on his face as he crossed the room and held out his hand to Mr. Page, who had risen to greet him.

"I am afraid I have disturbed you, Mr. Page," was the visitor's greeting, as he sank into the chair placed for him.

"I assure you that you have not. I was merely whiling away time by glancing over the reports from the school."

"Ah, a most wonderful affair! I am sorry that more of our rich men do not see the splendid results of your work. It was most kind of you to say that my boy, though not of poor parents, was most welcome to attend the school. I am sure it has been of the greatest benefit to him."

At this statement Hiram Page elevated his eyebrows a trifle, though perhaps his caller did not notice the act.

"I had no intention," answered Mr. Page, "of making it exclusively a school for the sons of poor parents. The sons of rich men need all the benefits to be found in the land, just as much as their less fortunate young fellow-citizens do."

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There was just a tinge of meaning in this that caused James Barron to flush slightly. He looked embarrassed, hesitated, then went on:

"You bring me directly, my dear Mr. Page, to the matter about which I came to speak with you. I understand that my son, in his impetuous way, became involved in some slight misunderstanding this afternoon."

"Rather more than a misunderstanding," rejoined Mr. Page promptly and frankly. "I have already seen the report in the case, and have talked with Lieutenant Houston about it. It seems that Phil was guilty of open insubordination, and that he grossly insulted his superior officer."

"Oh, come, come, now, my dear sir!" protested Mr. Barron with his most amiable smile. "That is rather a severe way to characterize my son's hasty conduct. Phil is high-spirited, quick to resentment, and of course he cannot look upon Tom Tallant as quite in the light of an equal."

"Then I am very sorry for your son," retorted Mr. Page, shutting his jaws with a peculiar snap. "You know, I think, what my idea is in the scheme I have undertaken. To get the best results in every way I have chosen the military system for the school. It has been my plan throughout that the brightest boy in the battalion shall hold the highest rank, the second brightest boy the second position,

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and so on. Phil has been able to win for himself the second lieutenancy of one of the companies. That proves that he is a young man of considerable ability, but it also proves that he is not Tom Tallant's equal."

"But consider my position—" broke in Mr. Barron.

"That has nothing to do with the matter. Phil has had nothing to do with winning your successes in life. There are altogether too many boys who get through life, somehow, on the merits of what their fathers did. Among the boys whom I have undertaken to guide to manhood such considerations must have no weight. Every boy stands on his own record. In the military organization of the school every boy must render every obedience that is proper to every other boy holding higher rank in the battalion. I am trying, Mr. Barron, to teach boys the beauties of discipline and obedience. No man can truly succeed in life unless he has learned those lessons. Have you noticed this desk of mine?"

"It is certainly a beautiful piece of furniture," declared Mr. Barron, rising to get a better view of the desk.

"It is entirely the work of a fifteen-year-old boy in the battalion."

"That is almost incredible."

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"The truth, though, I assure you. He is a youngster who displayed a strong talent for joining and wood working. He was rather inclined, though, to work by fits and starts; in a word, he used to be lazy. His instructor kept him at his work, however, never passing a fault, but always making him correct it. The military discipline of the battalion helped to make the instructor's task a little easier. Now, young Abbott, who made this desk for me, thanks to his having learned the art of obedience in all its branches, is going to become a first-class workman. He has such a grasp of his chosen trade that it won't be many years before he is much more than an ordinary workman. I could take dozens of other cases in the school and show you the same results. Nine tenths of my boys are going to be first-class men in their varying walks of life, all because their preparation is founded on strict discipline and obedience."

"But about Phil," said his father, seeking to digress. "I hope you are going to take an easy view of his boyish hot-headedness."

"I have told you that military discipline is an essential part of the plan of the school. Phil has committed a serious military offense. An hour ago I approved the report calling for a court-martial to sit on his case."

"A court-martial?" ejaculated Phil's father.

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"Yes; Lieutenant Houston will preside, and the officers of the battalion will sit with him. The court is called for Monday at eleven o'clock."

"Phil won't attend. I'm quite sure of that," declared Mr. Barron. "He would resent such a humiliation."

"Then I shall be sorry; but if he does not attend he is likely to be dropped through default."

For some moments Mr. Barron sat studying the face of Old Man Bounteous.

"See here, Mr. Page," he went on at last, "I hope you won't let matters go as far as that. I don't want to see my boy made a jest of. There is probably some middle ground that you and I, being older and more experienced men, can discover. Suppose we let this matter against Phil drop. Let me join you in supplying the benefits of your excellent school. There must be something—a library—the fittings of a laboratory—or something of that sort that I can donate to the school."

"There is nothing you can do," returned Mr. Page firmly and with dignity, "that will stop the court-martial from sitting. If Phil is guilty, he deserves to be disciplined. If he is innocent, the court will so declare, and no harm will be done."

"Don't you think," asked Mr. Parron earnestly, "that you and I have been too many years identified in business together for any such dispute to come up

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at this late day? I have always bought my tools of you, and had my lathes and machines made by you."

"And I hope you will continue to do that," was Mr. Page's quick answer. "But, believe me, my dear sir, such considerations cannot have the slightest influence on this matter of your son. That is altogether another matter. The school is founded on obedience and discipline. The slightest change in that principle would spoil the school. I shall be glad to talk with you over any other matters."

Throughout the boyhood part of Westmont little else than Phil's humiliation was talked of that Saturday evening. On Sunday the boys talked it over on the way home from Sunday school. It was the absorbing topic.

Monday morning there was a great flutter of excitement at roll call, which took place at a quarter of nine. Phil Barron was not present. The flutter continued, though in a suppressed way, during morning services in the assembly room. Then groups of boys went to their different classrooms, and the work of the day was on in earnest. Study and recitations were brisk in this school. There was little time to think of anything else until, at five minutes before eleven, the several instructors announced:

"Officers and enlisted men of the battalion will

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now pass to the assembly room, where the court-martial of Lieutenant Philip Barron will take place."

With eager, interested faces, though with orderly step and demeanor, the boys filed through the corridors to the assembly room. All, except the officers of the battalion, took their places in their accustomed seats. At the head of the room was a big desk around which were several chairs. Captain Tallant, being the complainant, did not serve with the court. The other young officers, each with his sword belted on, took their places around the table, the principal chair being reserved for Lieutenant Houston. That officer was not at first visible, but he soon entered the room, followed by Phil, Mr. Barron, and Mr. Page.

Phil, though minus his sword, was in uniform. He looked decidedly surly as he sank into the chair assigned him near the table. Mr. Page and Mr. Barron took seats at some distance from the court. Tom Tallant sat at the opposite end of the table from the defendant.

"The court will come to order," said Lieutenant Houston in his most judicial tone. "Spectators are cautioned against making any signs or sounds, either of pleasure or disapproval. Lieutenant Barron, you have the privilege of asking that any member of this court, except the president, my-

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self, be assigned to act as your counsel. Do you so request?"

"No," mumbled Phil, in a barely audible voice.

"Lieutenant Barron, you should address me, either as the president of this court, or as your superior officer, as 'sir.' Again I ask if you wish counsel assigned to aid you in your defense?"

"No, sir."

"Then Second Lieutenant Ruhlmann, of Company A, is directed to act as recorder of the court. First Lieutenant Paxton, of Company B, will act as judge advocate. Do you object to either of these appointments?"

"No."

"No—what?"

"No, sir."

Phil, feeling the eyes of eighty boys upon him, and knowing that the gaze of few, if any, of those eyes were sympathetic, began to get red and flustered. He was obliged to listen while Lieutenant Paxton read the written charges against him. Phil pleaded not guilty in a snapish voice.

Captain Tallant rose, advanced to the table and was sworn by Lieutenant Houston. Our hero's face was white, bloodless. He felt the ordeal more severely than anyone in the room, not even Phil excepted. But discipline, the keynote of Bounty-

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ville, was at stake. Tom resolutely smothered whatever personal feelings he may have had as he began his testimony. He was corroborated by Sergeant Carroll and three or four of the other boys who were called and sworn. Lieutenant Paxton, as judge advocate, conscientiously questioned and cross-examined each witness, though without shaking their testimony.

"Is that all of the evidence for the prosecution?" asked Lieutenant Houston.

"It is, sir," replied Tom. The judge advocate nodded.

"Lieutenant Barron, do you wish to testify?" inquired the president of the court.

"I have only to say," began Phil, rising, "that I—"

"If you wish to testify," interposed the court, "you will have to be sworn."

Phil held up his right hand, declaring solemnly that he would tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

"I have only to say," went on the culprit, "that I may have spoken sharply. I had every reason to. Tom Tallant—"

"Captain Tallant!" broke in the court warningly.

"Captain Tallant, then, spoke to me in a way that he should not have done. He forgot that he

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was not my equal in position. He seemed to delight in taking a mean advantage——”

“Stop, sir!” thundered the court. “Remember that you are under oath. If you can depose, and prove, that Captain Tallant used toward you any language that one gentleman was not justified in using toward another, then we shall be glad to hear you. But if you aggravate the charges testified to by the witnesses for the prosecution you will only injure your case the more. Have you any testimony to offer, or do you wish merely to make a speech?”

With eighty pairs of eyes turned upon him, and overwhelmed by the deserved severity of the court, Phil stammered, flushed, and came to a full stop.

“Mr. President,” rang Mr. Barron’s voice, as its owner started forward from his seat, “am I privileged to make a few remarks?”

“The accused has declined the services of counsel,” replied the army officer. “However, taking into consideration the circumstances of this peculiar case, I will order that you may address this court, if no other member of the court objects.”

There being no sign of dissent, Mr. Barron pressed his son into a chair. He addressed the court, pleading that the whole affair resulted from merely boyish impetuosity on both sides.

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He urged that the affair would best be ignored and forgotten.

"May I speak?" asked Captain Tom, rising from his seat when Mr. Barron had gone back to his.

"If what you have to say is pertinent to this trial," replied the president.

"I have only," said Tom magnanimously, "to request that the verdict of this court-martial incline rather to mercy than to severity. My complaint was founded on the ideas that I have been taught as to discipline. I have no desire to see the accused punished. I have no personal enmity in this matter."

"You liar!" panted Phil, jumping up from his chair with something of the swiftness of lightning. His cheeks were again aflame as he glared at his accuser.

Crossing the room, Mr. Barron again pressed his son into his chair, at the same time casting a deprecatory smile at the president.

At a signal from Lieutenant Houston the members of the court arose, leaving the room.

During the five minutes that they were out there was the wildest speculation among the non-commissioned officers and privates of the battalion, though not a sound was heard. Captain Tom sat studying the floor with absorbed gaze. Phil

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tried hard to assume an insolent smile that was not altogether a success.

Then the door opened. The court filed in, the members resuming their seats.

"The verdict of this court-martial," announced Lieutenant Houston, rising, "is ready. Lieutenant Barron, rise, sir."

Phil stood up, breathing hard.

"This court-martial finds you guilty, sir," went on the president. "Your offense is a flagrant one. It is also clearly proven. In view of the seriousness of your offense, in a military sense, we have been able to arrive at but one verdict, which, as I have already stated, is guilty. As for the sentence, it is ordered that you are to be reduced to the ranks. Further than that, you will be suspended from the privileges of the school and of the battalion for the period of one month."

"Are you satisfied, you upstart?" cried Phil angrily, glaring at Tom.

Despite the strictness of the Bountyville discipline, there was a moment's murmuring of approval over the court-martial's announcement. Over that buzz, and above Phil's voice, could be heard the steady tones of Mr. Page as he declared:

"Under the power vested in me by the rules, I approve the finding of the court, and also the sentence."

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"I say, I hope you're satisfied, you good-for-nothing upstart!" snarled Phil at his late accuser.

Silent, but with a world of manliness in his dignified bearing, Captain Tom received the taunt.

With an air of outraged propriety, James Barron crossed the room, took his son by the arm, and started for the door. Arriving there, Phil halted, quickly unbuttoned his uniform and cast it off, revealing another suit of clothes that he had worn underneath.

"Take your old duds!" he raged, kicking the uniform from him.

Then, as he passed out into the yard, the discomfited one cried tearfully:

"I'll make that pauper, Tom Tallant, feel mighty sorry for this!"

"We'll find a way to do it—never fear!" was his father's soothing answer.

CHAPTER III

A MUD PUDDLE AFFAIR

AFTERNOON roll having been called, the Bountiful battalion marched in column of twos to the assembly room. This was in the second story of the armory building, over the big drill room. On the same second floor, in the building proper, were the classrooms of the academic course. It was in these classrooms that the young soldiers recited in the forenoon.

But for the afternoon work there were very different surroundings. As an annex to the armory building proper there was, in the rear, another two-story building. Both floors of this annex were divided into all manner of rooms, large and small, according to the various needs. It was here that the young soldiers pursued the studies especially intended to fit them for the future's toil. Here was a laboratory in which chemical experiments and work were performed; here was a room of drawing and architecture; here was a laboratory for the study of physics, as applied to me-

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chanics; here a room fitted up with telegraph instruments.

Yet why go on with the enumeration? It is sufficient to add that there was a room fitted up for the study of any branch of activity which any Bountyville boy picked out for his own in later life. In the basement of the armory building were boilers and an engine. For metal and wood workers there was a special frame building, detached, and still a little farther to the rear, to which power was transmitted from the engine in the armory basement.

Lieutenant Houston was by far the busiest member of the faculty of this ideal school. Besides acting as instructor in military and gymnastic matters, he also taught mathematics, civil engineering, drawing, geology, and chemistry. Mr. Wright was the instructor in the English branches and Latin, and in as much Greek as was required. A man named Hamilton, an expert from Mr. Page's works, coached the boys in wood working, turning, and carpentry. Mr. Owen, also from the works, devoted a part of his time to teaching metal working and the uses of machinery. Freeman, the local printer, devoted two hours a day to instructing the little class in printing, while Stackhouse, a local electrician, who did much work at Mr. Page's factory, taught the work of the electrical worker in all the branches. Mr. Belmont, the local architect, im-

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parted as much as was needed of his craft to four boys. Squire Hosford lectured at intervals on law.

For all this, and the expenses of the text-books and the materials used, there was not a cent of charge. It was as free as air to all boys of Westmont who had reached the age of fourteen. All that was required of them was that each should possess a good character, should be at least of average brightness, should obey the instructors and all military superiors implicitly; and that each boy pledged himself to make the best use of his time at every turn.

It was a noble scheme, fulfilling the *whole* purpose of a true education better than any other free school in existence. No wonder that Mr. Page was known as "Old Man Bounteous." It was a title conferred upon him from the depths of love not only of the boys but of every parent in Westmont. Nearly all of the boys were sons of fathers employed at the works. They were, therefore, nearly all poor boys, or in most moderate circumstances. Yet the sons of well-to-do men had not been barred, as was seen in the case of Phil Barron.

Five minutes after the boys had filed out of the assembly room on this afternoon, the whirr of industry was heard on every hand. Boys were hard at work at their various tasks, teachers passing quickly from room to room. Every few minutes,

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though, a group of four or five boys would have been seen to meet in the armory. Here they opened the gun racks on the walls, took out their rifles, shouldered them, and left the armory at a brisk pace. Promptly at the end of fifteen minutes these same boys would be seen returning, replacing their rifles in the racks, and then proceeding in most orderly fashion to their interrupted work.

Where had these boys been? Ah, here was one of the most delightful parts of the day's work! At a little distance across a field from the armory was a long, deep cut through a hill. In this cut were placed targets at two hundred, three hundred, and four hundred yards' range. There was a railing at which these boys stood to do their shooting. It was presided over by Sergeant Heinz, lately retired from the United States Army, and one of the roundest-faced, jolliest, yet strictest veteran soldiers imaginable. He was the autocrat of the range. He it was who dealt out the three regulation ball-cartridges; who told each boy at which target to fire; who criticised and tried to improve the shooting of each, and who kept the record of each young soldier's achievements on the range, for a good percentage in marksmanship was as necessary as anything else to keep a boy in the Bountyville battalion. Five minutes was allowed to each boy in which to reach the range; five minutes for shooting and ab-

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sorbing instruction, and five minutes for returning to the school. While most of the boys did their rifle practice in the afternoon, a number were allowed to come in the morning.

Dr. Stiles was the latest member of the faculty engaged. He was to lecture to the boys on health topics, and, later on, to prepare any who showed an inclination that way for the study of medicine. In addition, he was to attend, free of charge, the families of all of Mr. Page's workmen.

On this Monday afternoon Dr. Stiles went from room to room in the annex under the guidance of Mr. Page. In one little room they came upon Tom Tallant, hard at work over a drawing desk. He was drawing a "plat" or map from field notes of a survey which he had made a few days before under the supervision of Lieutenant Houston.

As soon as the two gentlemen entered the room, Tom laid down pencils and brushes, got quickly upon his feet, stood at attention, and gave them a military salute.

"Resume your work, captain," said Mr. Page; whereupon Tom again took to his seat and his work. "I am showing Dr. Stiles what we aim to accomplish here."

"Yes, sir," answered Tom, as hard at work as ever.

"Why, this is really excellent work," declared

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Dr. Stiles, bending over to look at the nearly finished plat. "I have seen some work by our army engineer officers that was but little better."

"Yes, sir," acknowledged Tom. "Thank you." He drew a brush with practiced hand over a part of the drawing, limning in with water color. "Lieutenant Houston told me, a few minutes ago, sir, that there was very little fault to be found with this."

"Ah, there were some faults, eh?" queried Mr. Page.

"Yes, sir."

"What did you do about them?"

"Remedied them, sir, until Lieutenant Houston said he was quite satisfied."

Mr. Page smiled in a pleased way at Dr. Stiles, who nodded approvingly. It was a part of the old man's inflexible system that no faulty work should be passed by in this school.

"You seem as heartily interested in this as you were in the sham battle Saturday," observed Dr. Stiles.

"Both are very real to me, sir. So is everything else here."

Though our hero continued to work with incessant industry as long as the on-lookers remained in the room, he was on his feet again, and at attention, as they went out.

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Enthusiasm was the natural result of the Bountyville system. Hardly a boy of them all but felt a sense of disappointment when the warning bells rang at quarter of four to call them away from their various tasks for the day. Yet not one delayed in leaving, for in five minutes all were due in the yard, under arms, to go through the beautiful ceremony of "evening colors." This over with, and the rifles once more in the racks, the boys broke up into little groups, homeward bent.

Most of them went down Main Street on the first stage of their journey. Now, with all work and discipline done for the day, tongues began to wag right merrily. Naturally, the most interesting topic of all was the conduct of Phil Barron at court-martial, and his punishment.

"He must be feeling pretty sore," ventured Filson to Tom.

"If you'll excuse me, I won't discuss the matter," rejoined Tallant. "I'm sorry it had to happen at all."

"Why, here comes Phil, now!" called out one of the rearmost boys. "On horseback, too. Gracious! Doesn't he look important?"

Naturally, most eyes were turned in the direction from which came the sound of hoof beats. Yes, there was Phil, togged out like a young swell, and with brand-new riding boots on. He sat astride of

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the handsome horse which his father had bought for him nearly two years before.

He sat well, for he had been thoroughly trained in riding. He was as good a horseman as one would want to see. He had timed himself so as to pass the Bountyville boys, for he wanted to arouse their envy. Not another boy in Westmont had such a treasure as this horse.

"There they are!" muttered Phil resentfully, as he caught sight of the little groups ahead in the road. "They've been chuckling over me—I know they have. Pooh! What do I care for the whole lot of them—with their eternal 'obey,' their toy soldier maneuvers, and all their nonsense?"

Nevertheless, Phil *did* care, and knew that he did. The thought of the joys from which he was henceforth barred filled him with an anger that not even the possession of his beautiful mount consoled him for.

"The rest of them wouldn't be so bad, if it wasn't for Tom Tallant," went on Phil to himself. "He's the meanest fellow I know. He envies me because my father's rich, and he turns the whole lot against me. There, they're looking at me now. Here goes to show them how much I care for the whole pack."

He urged the horse into a gentle canter, sitting as firm and straight in saddle as he could. At the

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same time he tried to affect a smile of insolent swagger which he imagined immensely became him.

"When Phil catches up with us," suggested one of the boys ahead, "let us give him as good a hissing as we know how. It'll show the snob what we think of him."

Not an instant did Tom Tallant lose in wheeling around.

"Don't do it, fellows," he begged. "Don't. It wouldn't be fair."

"Why not?" chorused several.

"He has had trouble and humiliation enough. Put yourselves in his place. How would any of you like to be hissed?"

"But he deserves it," protested several.

"Perhaps he does, but that won't make it any easier for him to bear. You know what Mr. Page says to us about being soldiers and gentlemen. This is a chance to show our Bountyville training. Any boy who hisses, or who does anything to make Barron feel badly, isn't a real Bountyville boy."

But Phil, who, of course, heard nothing of this, grumbled inwardly:

"I'd like to do something to make Tom Tallant look like a fool before the rest of his cronies. Jupiter! I've caught the idea. I'll go at as fast a gallop as I can, wait until I get close to Tom, and then ride straight at him. He'll run out of the way

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as if he had seen a ghost, and I can laugh at him as I ride by. It'll make him feel cheap. But I mustn't let him see that I mean to ride at him until I get close to him."

Full of this new malevolence, Phil urged his mount into a fast gallop. Down the street flew horse and rider. The Bountyville boys, seeing them coming, filed to one side of the road to give the pair plenty of roadway. Several of the boys Phil passed with an affectation of superb disdain. Tom was at the head of the little party. Phil got close to him, then veered and rode as swiftly as he could straight at the young captain.

Tom turned, realizing his peril. Phil had decidedly overdone the thing. Tallant and the animal were but three leaps apart. A trifle scared, Phil tried to turn his animal, but it was impossible.

There was but one thing to do in that brief instant, if Tom Tallant were to escape being trampled on. Jumping aside one step—that was all there was time to do—our hero made a spring for the horse's bridle, caught it, and held on desperately.

Startled, the horse reared and shied. Totally unprepared for this move, Phil Barron was unseated, lurching sideways over the frightened beast's shoulder.

At least a dozen feet Tom was dragged before he could bring the panting, quivering steed to a

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halt. As he turned to look back, the young captain heard a mighty cheer of huge delight from his companions.

For Phil lay floundering in a puddle into which he had dropped at full length. From head to foot, he was a muddy, bedraggled object.

CHAPTER IV

BEARING FALSE WITNESS

“Oh! oh! oh!” sobbed Phil. “O-o-o-o-oh!”

He did not attempt to rise, but lay where he had fallen, groaning in a way that brought a rush of Bountyville boys to his side.

“Are you badly hurt?” they clamored.

“I feel as if I were almost dead!” replied the object of their sudden anxiety.

“Let me put my arm under your shoulders,” suggested Filson. “Then I can help you to rise.”

“Don’t you do it,” ordered Phil. “There’s something broken—I don’t know what. If you touch me, you’ll kill me.”

Very naturally Filson fell back, gazing in astonishment at the other boys.

“What ails you?” asked another.

“I don’t know,” declared Phil, after another series of dismal groans. “It feels as though something were broken. I’m afraid I’m crippled for life.”

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In their predicament the boys all turned to Tom Tallant.

He was still holding the horse by the bridle. That animal was so restless as to need some one's attention.

"Come here, Filson, and hold the beast," requested the young captain.

Filson obeying, our hero went back to the puddle, bent over Barron, and said:

"I hope you're not badly hurt, Phil."

"Go away!" screamed that youngster. "It's all your fault!"

"No; it wasn't really my fault," answered Tom gently. "You should have ridden more carefully. Do you know that you came within an inch of riding me down? But I'm sorry," he added earnestly, "awfully sorry to see you hurt."

"No, you're not," screamed Phil. "You're glad—and you know you are—to see me in this fix. You tried to do it!"

"Tried to do it?" echoed amazed Tom.

"Yes, you tried, and you did it well, too. I'm afraid I'm crippled for life. If I am, it's your fault."

"Nonsense," protested Tallant. "I only clutched at the bridle, to keep myself from going under your horse's feet. You ought to have been more careful. But I'm sorry just the same."

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"That's a lie, and you know it," Phil hotly declared. "You did it on purpose to see me thrown. It's just like you—you're a hypocrite and a coward!"

Though Tom Tallant flushed at this unmerited insult, he kept his temper.

"Can't you rise?" he asked.

"No; you know I can't. I believe you are waiting to see me die in this puddle."

Tom flushed once more, but he turned to some of the other boys, saying quietly and gravely:

"We must get help."

"Why don't you get a carriage?" demanded Phil. "Do you think I can't pay for one?"

"Is that what you want?" asked Tom.

"Yes—confound you!"

Tom turned to one of his friends, saying:

"Parker, get one, and be as quick as you can, please."

While Parker sped off to the depot not far away, and Phil continued to lie on his back in the puddle, moaning in a most miserable fashion, Tom stood by looking on, filled with compassion. Though our hero realized how narrowly he himself had escaped injury, he was generous enough to believe that the affair was the outcome of Phil Barron's carelessness. He was too manly himself to imagine that his enemy had deliberately planned to do him injury.

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"Am I to be left to die in this bog-hole?" demanded Phil, after a minute or two more had passed.

"If we could lift you," replied Tom, "we would do so. But you say you are too badly hurt to be touched. Shall we send for a doctor?"

"No," replied Phil savagely. "I don't want any of your village butchers. I'll go home and be attended by my own physician."

"You'll soon be about, and all right, too," said Tom, by way of encouragement.

"If I am," sneered Phil, "You'll be disappointed, won't you?"

Every word that he uttered was intended to enrage Tom Tallant. But the latter, though he had a suspicion of Phil's purpose, kept his temper admirably well.

"No," he answered, after a moment's battle with himself. "I shall be most glad to know that by to-morrow you are all right again. If you've no objection, I'll call at your house in the morning before school and find out how you are."

"Don't you dare!" warned Phil. "Don't you try to play the hypocrite with me. Oh, I'll see you punished for this day's work!"

Fortunately, perhaps, the rumble of wheels cut short any further interchange of words. A cab from the depot was being rapidly pulled to the

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scene. On the front seat, with the driver, sat Parker, waving his arms toward the little crowd.

Then the carriage drew up alongside, halting. Down from the seat got the driver. He gravely and sympathetically heard young Barron's account of the affair, mixed with a few comments from the Bountyville boys. Jehu's next move was to lift the sufferer into his cab. In this Phil permitted the help of two of the boys. Tom, with the certainty that his help would be disdained, did not offer it.

After a great deal of piteous shrieking, Barron was safely seated in the cab.

"Parker," whispered Tom, "ask him if he wants some one to go home with him."

Thrusting his head inside the cab, Parker put the question.

"Not by a good deal," came the emphatic, if not polite, answer from inside. "The best thing you fellows can do is to keep out of the way."

So the carriage drove away. For some minutes afterward the Bountyville boys remained near the scene, talking over what had happened. There were several who did not sympathize in the least with young Barron, nor were they slow to declare the fact, but Tom stopped this adverse criticism by gravely saying:

"Don't be too quick to judge, fellows. Of course, Phil doesn't love me, after what happened

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at the court-martial ; and I don't doubt we may all of us be too quick to blame him. He has been badly hurt, and we've simply got to be easy in our judgment of him."

By degrees the crowd broke up, the boys going their different ways to their homes. Tom, for his part, took his way to the little six-roomed cottage, an eighth of a mile from Mr. Page's works, that he knew as home. It was a plain little house, painted white, with green blinds, yet to him it was greater than any palace—for it was HOME.

Here he dwelt with his father, and with his sister, Margery, a sweet budding woman of twenty, who had been mother to him for the last four years.

On reaching home, Tom found that two or three errands were waiting for him. Without discarding his uniform, he turned back to the village, bought the things necessary for the evening meal, and returned home with them. By this time Margery was in the midst of the preparations for supper. Seated in a chair in a corner of the little kitchen, Tom told her what had happened on the way home from school. Though bustling about at her work, Margery found plenty of time to hear all that her cherished brother was saying.

"It was too bad," declared Margery, "but I can't see how you could have helped it, Tom. Whatever Philip Barron may think about it, I know you

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didn't do anything mean. That wouldn't be my brother's way."

Then Mr. Tallant came home. He was a middle-aged man, always tired at nightfall, and sometimes discouraged over the untoward way things had gone during the day. But he had a great admiration for and intense interest in his son. He looked to Tom to bring the family out of the poor circumstances they had always known.

After all three had seated themselves around the table in the little kitchen, Tom started with a narration of what had taken place on the way home. Margery put in a comment here and there. Mr. Tallant heard, nodding gravely here and there. He did not see any necessity for saying much; he was too well acquainted with his son to imagine such comment needful.

The meal was nearly over when there came a peremptory knock at the kitchen door.

"Come in!" called Mr. Tallant.

In response, the door slowly opened, showing the face of one whom all three recognized as that of Constable Deerman.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Deerman?" called Mr. Tallant. "Come in. Come right in. It's an age since I've seen you as close as this."

Obeying this hospitable invitation, the constable pushed the door wide enough open to admit his

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rather bulky body. He declined, with a shake of his head, the chair hospitably pushed toward him, and inquired:

“ Heard how Phil Barron was ? ”

“ Why, no,” replied Mr. Tallant, while son and daughter looked immediately interested. “ Can’t say that I have, and we’re all interested. Just a minute ago we were talking about it.”

“ The boy’s in a pretty bad way,” said Deerman. “ Dr. Parker was called in, and says there something serious the matter with Phil’s spine. Fact is, he’s injured in other ways, too. The lad may never be good for much again.”

All three of the constable’s hearers exchanged looks of dismay.

“ Fact is,” continued Deerman, speaking as if reluctantly, “ Phil’s father has been before the squire, and made complaint. He says Tom is to blame, does Phil, and his father says the same. Mr. Barron, having made the complaint, and the squire having issued a warrant, I’m sorry, but it’s my duty to arrest Tom.”

“ Arrest me ? ” echoed Tom Tallant, thunderstruck.

“ That’s about the idea,” replied Deerman, looking as if he wished some other officer had been assigned to the task.

Margery and her father exchanged dismayed

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glances, but Tom, springing up, showed a flushed but resolute face as he replied:

"Then, constable, there's nothing else for you to do. Very good. I'm ready."

"Glad you take it so easy," returned the officer. "Mr. Tallant, no offense intended. Sorry, but when a warrant's issued——"

"Say no more," broke in Tom. "Father, you'll be there, won't you? Margery, I'd rather you wouldn't come. The court is no place for a girl. Mr. Deerman, I'm ready for the start."

And, brushing away a tear, Tom rushed to the hat rack, seized his cap, and fairly pushed the stout constable through the doorway. Bang! Behind them closed the door. Tom walked so rapidly that Constable Deerman had difficulty in keeping up with him. Down a side street, and then into the main street they turned. In a few minutes, without a word having been exchanged, they reached the townhall. Here, in the basement, was the police station. Producing a key, Deerman admitted them both into the lower regions. Here there were an office, and in the next room four cells.

"The chief ain't here," said Deerman slowly. "Unless *he* comes, and orders it, I ain't a-going to lock you up. Court opens at eight o'clock, you know."

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"I know it," assented Tom, sinking rather dispiritedly into a chair. "Thank you for your kindness, Mr. Deerman."

So the constable dropped into another chair, lighted his pipe, and began to smoke. From one of the cells came the sounds of two men playing cards and using bad language. In another cell a woman sobbed wretchedly, fitfully. These were the usual flotsam and jetsam of a country court.

After nearly an hour the monotony was broken by the arrival of Mr. Tallant.

"I've been to see Mr. Page, Tom," was his father's greeting. "He says he doesn't think a lawyer will be necessary. It's very seldom that one appears in this court. There's going to be a crowd of the boys here to-night. They've heard of the affair, and they're on the street in uniform by dozens. You'll have plenty of sympathy back of you."

Tom smiled a little anxiously. Overhead there was the scuffing of many feet. Then a bell rang in the basement guardroom.

"Court's in," said Constable Deerman. "Well, we'll have to go upstairs."

He disappeared into the cell room, then came back again with his other prisoners. The two men were handcuffed together; the woman sobbed boisterously as she came along.

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"Come upstairs, Tom," called Deerman. "I don't need to watch *you*, I know."

Tom and his father followed in the rear of the little procession, up the back stairs and into the prisoners' pen of the courtroom. The two men sank defiantly down into chairs, glaring about them. The sobbing woman huddled in her seat, crouching away from human gaze. Tom, when he entered, and caught sight of the little courtroom, tightly packed with spectators, felt a hot flush of shame mount to his cheeks and forehead. Then, with the full realization that he was guilty of no crime, he drew himself erect and surveyed the scene before him, next relaxing into the chair that Constable Deerman indicated. His father passed through the gate of the pen, seating himself just outside.

Nearly the whole Bountyville battalion was present, each boy in his neat blue uniform. Lieutenant Houston was there in civilian dress. Mr. Page and Dr. Stiles were together, well up in front.

At sight of Tom the boys sent up a cheer.

"Order!" yelled Clerk of the Court Fosdick, and the tumult promptly subsided.

Out by the door at the rear stood Mr. Barron, looking frowningly on.

"First case!" ordered Squire Hosford.

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The sobbing woman was tried on a petty charge, quickly convicted, fined twenty dollars, which she was unable to pay, and led, sobbing more loudly than ever, back to her cell. The two men were each sentenced to three months in the county jail. Despite his grit and sense of innocence, our hero could not repress a shudder.

“Case of the People against Thomas Tallant, for felonious assault!” called Clerk Fosdick. There was a loud stir in the room, a craning of necks. The sensational case had been reached. There was a stir by the door, too. Two men came in, carrying a reclining chair in which Phil Barron rested, slightly moaning as he was brought down the isle. Behind the chair marched Mr. Barron, Dr. Parker, and the cab driver who had taken Phil home. Hostile glances from the juvenile part of the audience followed this little party.

As one in a dream Tom stood up. There was intense stillness in the room as the clerk unfolded the papers in the case and prepared to read them. Despite the hush, the young prisoner heard hardly more than a faraway buzz.

“Prisoner at the bar, how do you plead—guilty, or not guilty?” asked the clerk.

That brought Tom Tallant back to the present with a rush. There was soldierliness in every inch of his bearing as he drew himself up, faced

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the audience and then Squire Hosford, and answered clearly, manfully:

“Not guilty!”

He held up his hand to be sworn, Phil, Dr. Parker, and the cab driver doing the same. Then Phil began to testify, in a weak voice punctuated by moans. His story accused Tom Tallant of wilfully and jerkily stopping his horse, precipitating the witness to the ground. He told his false story unblushingly, with his frowning father at his side. The cabman testified to what he had seen. Dr. Parker then took the stand. The doctor testified that he believed Phil’s fall had produced partial paralysis and internal injuries. Phil moaned dismally while this was being told.

That closed the case for the “People.” Tom, in his own behalf, recited just what had happened. He did not try to throw much blame on Phil, but declared his belief that careless riding was the cause of it all.

“If I had not clutched at the horse’s bridle, I should have been run over,” he truthfully finished.

“Do you wish to call any witnesses?” asked Squire Hosford.

Half a dozen of the boys who had witnessed the affair were picked out from the audience, and came quickly forward. They gave their versions, quickly

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and eagerly. Mr. Page now stood beside the squire's desk.

"It's a mixed-up case," remarked Squire Hosford to Old Man Bounteous. "The testimony for the prosecution is just as positive as that for the defense. I'm very, very sorry, but I'm afraid I'm bound to hold young Tallant for the Grand Jury."

Low as the words were spoken, Tom heard them. He gave a convulsive start of apprehension.

"May I say a few words for my young friend, the prisoner? May I make a suggestion for the defense?" asked Mr. Page aloud.

"There is no reason to deny your request," replied Squire Hosford.

"Then, your honor, it seems to me that, as much of the strength of the prosecution's case is based on the testimony of Dr. Parker, the defense should be allowed to have medical testimony introduced. Dr. Stiles is well known to the court, and possesses the confidence of all. I ask the court to call Dr. Stiles and direct him to examine Philip Barron."

"I object!" cried Mr. Barron quickly.

"Nevertheless, the request is a reasonable one, and the court so directs," replied Squire Hosford quietly. "Dr. Stiles will please come forward and examine the plaintiff's injuries."

Very quickly Dr. Stiles obeyed. He bent over

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the chair in which Phil sat. That youngster redoubled his moaning.

"Don't make a fuss," said Stiles quietly. "I'm not going to hurt you."

He felt the boy's pulse, next inserting his fingers back of Phil's collar, then ran them over nerves and muscles in different parts of the body. There was a grim compression of Dr. Stiles's lips as he proceeded.

Suddenly, without the slightest warning, the physician yanked the boy bodily from the chair, standing him upon his feet. Not pausing an instant Dr. Stiles seized Phil by his collar and the tail of his jacket, and ran him swiftly across the front of the courtroom.

"Let me go, you brute!" screamed Phil in a passion, struggling to wrench himself free. Dr. Stiles let him go. His face blazing with rage, Phil kicked at the doctor, who nimbly, smilingly dodged.

"You scoundrel! How dare you use my son in that brutal fashion?" roared Mr. Barron, crossing the room.

"And how dare you, sir, bring your son here to perjure himself into a convict's garb?" hotly demanded the physician.

Mr. Barron paled in an instant under this thrust. There was wild commotion in the little

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courtroom that required the full power of Clerk Fosdick's lungs to quell.

"I beg the court's pardon for my violent conduct," cried Dr. Stiles, crossing to the bench again. "It was the only way I could expose the sham of the plaintiff's injuries, from which he does not suffer. Does your honor wish me to be sworn?"

"It is not necessary," replied Squire Hosford. "The court is satisfied with what it has seen. The prisoner is acquitted and discharged."

In an instant Tom Tallant was out of the pen, both his hands being grasped by those who crowded forward to congratulate and lionize him.

"It was most extraordinary, your honor," declared Dr. Parker, in a voice of amazement. "I believed Philip Barron to suffer from the injuries to which I testified. It may be that Dr. Stiles's rough treatment was just what was needed to restore him."

"I believe your testimony was sincere, doctor," rejoined the squire frankly. "You were imposed on—that is all. Mr. Barron, this has been a strange occurrence. It looks as if your son had wilfully perjured himself. If so, he can be punished for perjury. I shall take the matter under consideration."

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"Your honor," protested Mr. Barron, pale and angry, "I—I—"

"Silence, sir, and take that young liar from my sight," ordered the squire.

With bent heads and hurried steps, Mr. Barron and his son walked past that sea of jeering faces.

"Court's adjourned!" thundered Squire Hosford.

No sooner had Tom emerged into open air than he was pounced upon by half a dozen enthusiastic Bountyville boys, who raised him to their shoulders, the rest following, cheering.

Then wheels rolled briskly by them. It was the Barron carriage, homeward bound. A storm of hisses from the boys followed it. Then, in triumph, Captain Tom Tallant was taken home on the shoulders of his comrades. He was lustily cheered, long after he had vanished through the door of home.

But trouble was brewing for him. Revenge, hate, and the smarting of defeat presaged a gathering storm of trouble that would have dismayed even Tom Tallant's stout young heart, could he have foreseen.

CHAPTER V

BOUNTYVILLE'S NEW RIVAL

STANDING on the parade ground before the armory the next morning, just before the time for assembly and roll call, Captain Tom Tallant looked down the road upon a sight that filled him with wonder.

Privates Finley, Erroll, and Gross were coming up the road, each in civilian dress, and each with a bulging package under his arm.

"What's the meaning of this?" asked Tom, going up to them. "All members of the battalion are expected to report each morning in uniform."

"That's just it," said Erroll promptly, though with something of a choke in his voice. "We don't belong to the battalion any longer."

"Why——"

"You see," added Erroll hastily, "our fathers are employed by Mr. Barron."

"And Mr. Barron has ordered your fathers to take you out of the battalion?" queried Tom, a good deal astonished.

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Erroll nodded. The other two boys were plainly willing for him to act as spokesman. Disappointment was written across the features of all three. Membership in the Bountyville battalion was not a thing to be lightly thrown away.

"I'm sorry--heartily sorry," said Tom, in a tone of genuine sympathy. "However, I suppose it can't be helped. But come inside, please, and tell Lieutenant Houston."

When roll was called that morning three boys stood a little way down the road and watched until the column of twos had disappeared inside the armory. Then, with sober faces and silent tongues, they turned and walked down the street. A good deal had gone out of their lives.

In two days more Phil Barron judged it safe to appear again on horseback, riding about town with a more insolent air than ever. In the meantime it became noised about that there were a good many more visitors than formerly at the Barron house. Visitors were constantly coming and going. There was an air of secret business about this state of affairs that piqued the curiosity of not a few of the Bountyville boys. It was Dick Henderson, first lieutenant of Tom's company, who first got wind of the true state of affairs. He came to our hero just before roll call

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one morning, his face glowing with suppressed excitement.

"What do you suppose Phil Barron is doing?" demanded Dick.

"Most anything," replied Tom with a smile.

"Bountyville is to have a rival."

"What—"

"That's just it," went on Dick, irrepressibly. "Phil Barron is organizing a military company. His father is paying all the bills. They've had tailors, gunsmiths, military instructors, and I don't know what not up at the Barron house. Phil is to be captain, of course, and the company is going to be about as swell an affair as money can make it."

"I wish them success," said Tom honestly. "They won't hurt us any, and it does every boy good to get a military training. But where is Phil going to raise his recruits? Every Bountyville boy that is big enough is in our battalion."

"Well, the three who had to leave us will do for a starter. They're all going into Phil's company. The rest of the boys he has raised over in Fordham. The Fordham boys are wild over the idea. It was through Fordham that I heard about it."

"Glad of it. It's a good thing for the Ford-

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ham boys," declared Captain Tom. "Is Mr. Barron going to start a school like ours?"

"Oh, no; the affair is to be military, and nothing more. The Fordham boys had their first drill last night, and they're to keep on drilling every evening until the new company is ready to turn out in public. It is understood, of course, that Phil and his father are going to do their best to make our battalion look foolish beside their company."

"Oh, that's all right," retorted Tom cheerfully. "Keen rivalry will be good for both organizations. We'll meet them in a prize drill when they've had time to get up in their maneuvers and manual."

More than twoscore of Bountyville boys had crowded around the two young officers by this time. They eagerly listened to the news, offering many comments.

In the days that followed, interest in the rival organization did not diminish. Phil had caused it to be given out that Bountyville boys, by deserting the battalion, could enter his company, provided the applicants were personally satisfactory to him. Yet not one of the Bountyville boys applied for the honor—a fact which must have secretly nettled Phil a good deal.

At last came the day when Phil's new com-

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pany, called the "Barron Cadets," were to make their first appearance in Westmont. It was on a Saturday forenoon. As it happened, the Bountyville battalion was under orders for a parade that same forenoon.

Before assembly had blown at the armory, those of the boys who were loitering outside heard a tremendous rub-a-dub-dub, coming gradually nearer. Like wildfire the word passed from mouth to mouth. Every window at the armory was crowded with heads. All were in time to see the Barron Cadets come in sight. There was a murmur of appreciation as the Bountyville boys caught sight of the new uniforms. Phil's company was uniformed in cadet gray, each boy looking as if he had just been turned out from the hands of the tailor. The rifles and bayonets were light and jaunty. Considering the short time the Barron Cadets had had for drill, they presented a very creditable appearance. Ahead of them marched a boys' drum corps, rattling out a march with bravest sound.

Phil marched at the head of his company, looking neither to the right nor to the left. He was consumed with curiosity to know how his late comrades regarded his new grandeur, but he could not honor them with a look.

Soon after the battalion fell in and started on

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its parade. For an hour or more the Bountyville boys marched, and then, on Main Street, sighted the Barron Cadets approaching them from the opposite direction.

Tom halted his own command in battalion front at the side of the street.

"May I ask what you're going to do, captain?" whispered Lieutenant Henderson.

"Salute our rivals when they march past."

"Is Phil Barron worth it?"

"Perhaps not, lieutenant. But they are carrying the United States flag with them. That is worthy of a salute every time."

Onward came Phil just behind his drum corps. He saw the battalion drawn up in line, and was puzzled by the maneuver.

"Are they going to hiss us?" he wondered, flushing over the memory of a recent occasion.

He marched on in a good deal of trepidation, though he did not look more than covertly at his former comrades. Just as the cadets reached the right of the Bountyville line Tom commanded:

"Present arms!"

Officers and men alike saluted the grand old colors. Phil flushed redder than before. He knew that every claim of military courtesy demanded that he acknowledge the salute in kind, but this he could not bring himself to do. The cadets

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marched past without a sign, leaving very disgusted expressions on the faces of some of the Bountyville boys. Without a twitch, however, Tom gave the order to march, and every minute took the rival organizations farther apart. But the incident, when related afterward in Westmont, did not increase the local estimate of Phil.

Down by the riverside a boathouse had been going up in great haste. It was a large and handsome affair, and aroused a good deal of curiosity. It soon leaked out that, instead of an armory, this building was to be a clubhouse for the cadets. Before the building was quite finished, two handsome eight-oared racing boats were launched from it. Four canoes for pleasure trips were soon added to the flotilla. Phil loudly bragged in Westmont of the superior advantages of belonging to his company, and hinted at other delights to follow.

Decoration Day was now coming on. Westmont and Fordham contained, between them, a Grand Army post that paraded alternately in the two towns. This year it was Westmont's turn to have the parade. It had been supposed for some time that the Bountyville battalion would act as escort to the post on Decoration Day.

But Mr. Barron presented the post with an

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expensive silk flag. About the same time it became known that the post had formally invited the Barron Cadets to take the right of line on Decoration Day. Mr. Barron smiled quietly. Phil laughed boisterously whenever he spoke of the matter. It would be in vain to say that the Bountyville boys were not chagrined over the turn of affairs. Tom's command was to be permitted to parade, but it must take second place. There was talk among the Bountyville boys of withdrawing from the parade.

"That won't do at all," Tom promptly and positively declared when the plan was broached to him by some of the others. "It would be an act of courtesy to the men who served their country in '61. Besides, the more the merrier, and we couldn't both have the right of line. We'll march our best, and so will the cadets, and both will do honor to the Grand Army."

This better counsel prevailing, the boys swallowed their chagrin, accepting second place in the escort.

Decoration Day came around, fair, bright, and warm. The parade was to form in front of the townhall, starting at ten in the morning. Before nine Tom left his home, walking slowly down the road toward the townhall. He wanted to be on hand early, in order to stop any possible friction

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that might arise between the boys of the rival organizations.

Just before reaching the street that led by the townhall, it was necessary to pass by a bit of road bordered on both sides by woods. Here under the shade of a tree sat two men who looked like workingmen. On the ground between them were two baskets, one filled with small bottles of ginger ale. Each of the men had one of these bottles open in his hand. They were slowly drinking as Tom came along.

"Thirsty?" asked one of them.

"No, I thank you," replied the boy pleasantly.

"Oh! Perhaps a smart-looking soldier like yourself is ashamed to be seen drinking with workingmen," suggested one of the men, in what sounded like an aggrieved tone.

"My father is a workingman," said Tom simply.

"Then don't be stiff," urged one of the pair. "Try a bottle of this with us. It's cool and good."

"If you wish."

Taking a bottle from the basket, the man opened it, passing it up to Tom, who, with a polite "Thank you," slowly drank the contents. He handed the bottle back, and stood for some moments answering the questions which the men,

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who seemed to be strangers in the place, asked him about the battalion.

What could be wrong? Tom felt suddenly ill and dizzy. His senses began to leave him. Fight as he would against it, that sensation overpowered him. Pressing his hands to his head, he reeled and fell.

"We've fixed him!" said one of the men with a chuckle, as both sprang up. Seizing Tom by his shoulders and feet they bore him quickly back into the bushes. Then one went back and got the baskets.

"Let him lie here a while," suggested the one who appeared to be the leader of the pair. Lighting their pipes, the men sat there, coolly watching the insensible boy.

Time went on. At last one of the pair, after having frequently consulted his watch, took a flask from one of his pockets. Unscrewing the cap, he inserted the neck between Tom's teeth, pouring a little of the stuff down his throat. The boy stirred uneasily. After a second dose, the man leeringly sprinkled some of the stuff over the unconscious one's clothing. Then both rolled him over, plastering the back of his uniform coat with mud.

"He'll do now, when he comes to," grinned the leader of the pair. "He's beginning to open his

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eyes. Help him on to his feet, and we'll get him started right."

Raising Tallant to his feet, they began to work his arms pump-handle fashion. In a little while Tom came to, though he was badly dazed.

"What's wrong?" he asked drowsily.

"Oh, you felt a little sleepy, I guess; but you're all right now. Hurry up, for the parade will be waiting for you."

Cautiously looking about them to make sure that they were not observed by anyone, the two men got him to the road, started him in the right direction, then turned and swiftly fled.

It was after ten o'clock. Before the townhall stood a large crowd of spectators. All was in readiness for the start of the parade, except that Captain Tallant had not arrived. Phil was walking up and down close to his own company, which was awaiting the order to "fall in." He superciliously ignored the Bountyville boys, who, in their turn, betrayed no very lively interest in the Barron Cadets. Under the trees on the green lounged the members of the Grand Army post. The members of the band hired for the occasion were sitting on the townhall steps.

"What are we waiting for?" inquired several of the Grand Army men.

"Captain Tallant hasn't arrived yet," replied

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the marshal of the parade. "We're going to wait a few minutes more for him."

In a little group by themselves stood Mr. Page, Lieutenant Houston, Squire Hosford, and Dr. Stiles. Old Man Bounteous was plainly annoyed over Tom's failure to arrive.

"Here comes the youngster now," suddenly ejaculated the squire, glancing down the street. "But, in the name of Blackstone, what ails him?"

What ailed the young captain, indeed? For Tom looked utterly bewildered. He lurched and reeled, his legs bending beneath him. His cap was on awry; his sword threatened to get between his unsteady legs and trip him. He had every appearance of being intoxicated.

Hundreds of eyes were turned upon him in utter astonishment as Captain Tom Tallant drew nearer.

CHAPTER VI

IN DEEP DISGRACE

“ **W**HAT in the world can be the matter? ” asked Mr. Page in a troubled undertone, his anxious gaze riveted on the approaching boy.

“ Can’t say, just yet,” replied Dr. Stiles; but there was a grim line about his mouth.

Some of those nearest Tom caught sight of the mud on his coat as he lurched past them. Whispers began to run around. Many of the more thoughtless grinned broadly, exchanging significant winks.

Catching sight of Mr. Page, though not until he had got quite close to that gentleman, Tom went unsteadily toward him. One wavering hand went up to the cap visor in a wretchedly unmilitary salute.

“ I’m here, sir,” said the boy thickly.

“ So I see,” said Mr. Page, rather sternly.

Again Tom tried to bring his right hand up to the visor. The move threw him off his balance. He would have fallen, had not Dr. Stiles sprung

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forward and caught him in his arms. Gently the physician lowered the boy to the ground.

"Whisky!" muttered the doctor to himself as he caught the odor that came from the boy's breath and clothing. "I thought so. It looked that way."

With a rush the curious crowd surged about them.

"Stand back, can't you?" cried Dr. Stiles, peremptorily. "Way back! He needs air, and lots of it!"

"What's the matter?" came the query from many lips.

"It *looks something like* a case of heat prostration," replied Dr. Stiles tartly. "Captain Tallant won't be able to take part in the parade. I must get him to his home. Some one go for a carriage, please."

Two or three ran off at once: Through the crowd Margery Tallant and her father pushed their way. They knelt anxiously beside the fallen one, but the smell of whisky reached their nostrils. They did not dare ask what the matter was.

To get the crowd out of the way as quickly as possible, Mr. Page asked the marshal to start the parade immediately. Assembly was quickly sounded, Captain Dickson, of B Company, taking command of the battalion. The parade was mov-

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ing, most of the crowd with it, by the time that the carriage arrived. Tom's father, haggard with worry and humiliation, helped the boy to his feet, piloting him toward the door of the vehicle.

"What's the matter? Intoxicated?" whispered Mr. Page, tears in his kindly old eyes.

"I don't see any other explanation," was the physician's whispered answer.

Mr. Tallant got into the carriage, supporting limp, ill-smelling Tom. His sister, her eyes wet with tears, seated herself in front of them. Dr. Stiles took a seat beside her, and the carriage rolled away.

Neither father nor sister asked any questions of the doctor. What need was there? Was it not altogether too apparent what was the matter with the boy? But as they neared home Mr. Tallant looked at the physician and uttered brokenly:

"Be sure that my boy can explain this all right when he is able to talk."

"I certainly hope so," replied the doctor.

They got Tom into the house and put him to bed, Dr. Stiles administering some medicine.

"Now leave him alone and let him sleep," was the doctor's direction. "Unless he calls for something, don't disturb him until I call this afternoon."

Away in another part of the town the band

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was playing. People were applauding the veterans, and giving a goodly share of their approbation to the trim-looking young soldiers of the present generation. Phil's cadets were at their best. The Bountyville boys marched in splendid lines, too, going through every command with precision. Yet over the Bountyville boys there hung a pall to their enjoyment. Hardly one but was disheartened by Captain Tallant's too evident disgrace.

Through the day Tom lay upon his bed in a stupor. At times he was partly conscious, yet not enough so to be curious as to what had happened. Every little while Margery tiptoed to the door, looking in at him. Two or three times Tom caught sight of her, saw how red her eyes were, and wondered, though only in a vague, dull way, if he were very ill.

In the afternoon Dr. Stiles came again. With him were Mr. Page and Lieutenant Houston. First of all, the physician went into Tom's room alone. He examined our hero critically, then mixed something and made him drink it. That brought Tom out of his lethargy after a while. He tried to talk, but Dr. Stiles, silencing him, helped him to get into shirt and trousers. Then he led the boy over to an armchair, and seated him in it. This done, he stepped to the door, nod-

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ding to Mr. Page and Lieutenant Houston, who had waited just outside.

In came Mr. Page. Tom had never seen him look so solemn before. In the army officer's face was that martinet look that our hero had seen there before when the boys were careless at drill or lacking in discipline.

"Captain, this has been a very bad day's work," began Mr. Page slowly and sorrowfully, as he stood before the boy's chair.

"I don't understand it myself, sir," replied Tom, a little huskily. "That illness came over me so suddenly that it carried me off my feet."

"Illness!" repeated Mr. Page. "Don't attempt to trifle with me, sir!"

"I am not attempting anything of the sort, sir," replied poor Tom, opening his eyes very wide and regarding the old man attentively.

"Do you deny that you were under the influence of liquor?"

"I?" cried Tom. "I?"

He could go no further. Amazement had mastered him.

"Certainly," replied Mr. Page. "We could all see it. Why, when you reeled up to me and fell we could all smell that vile whisky."

"Whisky!" repeated Tom, his bewilderment increasing.

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Dr. Stiles nodded. Lieutenant Houston was looking straight at him without word or sign.

" You can't deny that you had been drinking?" challenged Mr. Page.

" I? I? Yes—" began Tom, a flood of recollection suddenly rushing over him. Then he gave them as straightforward an account as he could of just what had taken place in the bit of woods. Yet he could see that all three were looking at him with incredulous glances.

" And you solemnly declare that ginger ale was all you drank?" questioned Old Man Bounteous.

" As I live, sir," came the earnest answer, " that was all."

" Doctor," questioned Mr. Page, turning, " did you ever know ginger ale to have such an effect on anyone?"

" Never," solemnly replied the physician, though a half smile struggled to his face.

" Did you ever know it to give a whisky odor to the breath?"

" Never, sir."

Again Mr. Page bent his severe gaze upon the boy.

" Now, sir, do you still persist in this story of yours?"

" Why, of course I do, sir," cried Tom, rising

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and steadying himself on the arm of the chair. "I have told you the whole truth, Mr. Page, and it seems to me you should know me well enough to know that I wouldn't, even to save my life, tell you anything else."

"Captain Tallant," broke in the army officer, moving a step nearer to the boy, "do you realize the full importance of what you are saying? Do you realize that a soldier's honor is his most precious possession? Do you realize that one who utters a falsehood is wholly unworthy of his uniform and of the name of soldier?"

"I certainly do, sir," replied the boy firmly. "I wouldn't have it any other way, either."

"But how could ginger ale have such an effect as we witnessed—and smelled!"

"It couldn't, unless——"

Tom stood suddenly erect as he came to this pause. With his eyes flashing, he soon finished:

"Unless the stuff had been tampered with!"

"Do you believe that to be the case?" asked Mr. Page.

"I'm afraid, sir, that I must, in view of what happened. This much I tell you, sir, on my honor. I have never knowingly tasted liquor—either today or at any other time."

"That is on your honor as an officer and a gen-

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tleman?" questioned Lieutenant Houston, looking at him searchingly.

"Yes, sir, and on my word as an American!"

Tom was looking fearlessly now at his interviewers. His face had become flushed with his earnestness, with his zeal to impress them with the truth of what he said. Weak as he had been on rising, he seemed to gain strength from this crisis of the ordeal. His eyes had fire in them; there was the pride of conscious truth and uprightness in his face. As he stood there he looked what he was—every inch the soldier and gentleman.

"Sit down, my boy," said Mr. Page, more gently, even pressing Tom into the chair. "You are not yet in any condition to stand."

"But, gentlemen," protested Tallant, "it seems to me that I should be on my feet to meet such a charge as you appear to be making against me."

"We haven't made any charge yet," replied Mr. Page. "We are inquiring into circumstances that look very bad on the face of them. Be sure that we will fairly hear your whole explanation. That we want such an explanation you can hardly wonder, for the honor of the battalion and of the school is at stake."

"But what further explanation can I make?"

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asked Tom. "I have told you all there is to tell."

"Then you believe the ginger ale was drugged?"

"I *suspect* it, sir, for it seems plausible, and there is no other way in which I can account to myself."

"But why should anyone want to play such a dastardly trick upon you?"

"I only know of one, sir, who would possibly feel inclined to place me in such a bad light."

"Name him."

"That seems a mean thing to do, sir, in view of the fact that I have not the least proof to offer."

"Nevertheless, name him."

"Is it necessary, sir? Can't you guess? Is there more than one in Westmont who would wish to do me such an injury?"

Mr. Page slowly nodded. Then he turned to Dr. Stiles.

"Doctor, as a medical man, what do you think of this idea?"

"It is possible that Tallant was drugged," was the reply.

"But the odor of liquor?"

"That could easily have been administered to him while he was unconscious."

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"Do you believe it to have been the case?"

Tom looked eagerly at the doctor. Dr. Stiles reflected for some moments before he replied:

"That may be the answer. It is possible. That is all I can honestly say."

"Captain Tallant," went on Mr. Page earnestly, "I need hardly tell you that you have been one of my favorite boys. I have always looked to you as a model for the rest. I was delighted when you fairly won the highest rank in the battalion. I have believed in you as the best sample of what could be accomplished by the school I founded. I have taken great pride in you from the start."

He paused, his voice breaking.

"To-day's sad happening is known all over town. It is being talked of everywhere. The good name of the battalion and of the school is at stake. If you are guilty, and this act were to pass unnoticed, it would forever destroy the discipline on which the school rests as a basis. I will tell you, frankly, that when I came here it was my intention to order you suspended, and to have your case passed upon by the usual court-martial. Unless new evidence is brought forward, it seems to me the best thing I can do is to make some statement to the battalion, and then to allow you to continue in your present position to the end of the

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term. I am moved to this by the realization that the defense you offer is a reasonable one."

"Do you still believe me guilty, then?" asked Tom, choking a little.

"I want to be fair and impartial on both aspects of the question," replied the old man. "So I tell you honestly that I don't know just what to think."

"Have you ever thought me a liar, sir?" demanded Tom, once more rising.

"No; I never did."

"Do you think me one now, sir?"

"Tallant," rejoined Mr. Page, his eyes wet, "I have already assured you that I don't know exactly what to say or think. So I can only say that this will be allowed to blow over. For the future, I hope your conduct will always be as irreproachable as it has been heretofore."

"But for one reason I would promptly resign," said Tom proudly. "If I did, it would be accepted by most people as a confession of guilt. I can make no such confession. But I shall do everything in my power, if there is anything to be done, to make you see and acknowledge that I have been a victim, and not a sinner."

"Very well; that is the status of the case," wound up Mr. Page.

Lieutenant Houston nodded.

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"And now, good night, Captain Tallant," continued Old Man Bounteous.

He left him with a silent, meaning handclasp that almost broke the boy's heart.

Left to himself, Tom began to pace the floor in fearful agitation.

"If you have done this thing, Phil Barron—" he cried, clenching his fists. "But, no! I don't want to believe that you're mean enough!"

Then Tom's father and sister came in. Of course they believed him, and their sympathy had great sustaining power.

But on the parade ground before the armory the next morning Tom saw that many of the boys were looking curiously at him. Assembly was sounded five minutes earlier than usual, and, as soon as roll call had been gone through with, Captain Tallant made a manly, straightforward speech that carried conviction to most of his hearers. While he spoke of his belief that some one had played a dastardly trick upon him, he was most careful not to name Phil, even by implication.

"Three cheers for Captain Tallant!" cried a voice from the ranks.

With a rousing vim the cheers were given.

"Thank you—thank you all!" acknowledged Tom. "Right, face!"

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He marched them into the armory, up to the assembly room, and the day's work began in earnest.

There was a marked difference at noon in the conduct of the boys. He had re-won their confidence. They crowded about him to assure him of the fact.

In the afternoon Tom went to the little room where he did his work. While he was unlocking his desk Lieutenant Houston came in.

"Is that plat work ready, Captain Tallant?" asked the army officer.

"It is finished as far as you wanted it to be before you saw it, sir."

"I will look at it, then."

Throwing up his desk lid, Tom drew out the paper in which he kept his map work wrapped. With nimble fingers he took off the paper, laid the sheets upon the table—then gasped.

"What's this?" demanded Lieutenant Houston impatiently.

Not a sign of a map was there. Instead, the topmost sheet was adorned with a grinning caricature of a face, wretchedly drawn.

In dismay Tom glanced at all of the sheets underneath. They were of the same kind.

"Can you make no better use of your time, sir, than that?" asked the army officer coldly.

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"I never did *that!*" Tom indignantly declared.

"Then who did?"

"I wish I knew, sir."

"Where are your maps?"

Tom rummaged helplessly through his desk. There was not a sign of them there. He rose quickly, looking all around the room.

"Some one must have replaced my maps with these affairs," he asserted, pointing to the miserable caricatures.

"You have the only key to your desk?"

"So I believe, sir."

"And you believe some one has tricked you?"

"Most emphatically, sir."

"Captain Tallant, you appear to be in a streak of bad luck. I would advise you to get out of it as quickly as possible. You can redraw the maps?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Then I would advise you to use all the haste that good work permits."

Tom saluted, and Lieutenant Houston, without another word, passed from the room.

For some minutes Tallant stood looking blankly at the walls about him.

At last he sank back into his chair, letting his

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head fall forward in his hands, with his elbows on the desk.

"What ails me?" he murmured. "What does this all mean? What is likely to happen next?"

Then he went bravely to work to replace the maps. Yet the beginning of disheartenment was upon him.

All that afternoon, and late into the night at home, he toiled to make good the ravages of the mischief-maker.

CHAPTER VII

FACING THE ENEMY

THE next day, being Saturday, out-of-door military exercise was due. This week it took the form of a practice march, beginning at eight o'clock in the morning, and ending about noon, the distance to be covered being about twelve miles.

Owing to the earliness of the hour for the start, the boys had to hasten to the armory almost immediately after breakfast. They arrived in the blue uniforms of the United States Infantry pattern. At the armory it was necessary to change these for khaki uniforms like those that United States troops wear in the field. Around the drill room of the armory were closets to hold the extra uniforms and other equipments, each boy having a closet of his own.

There was a busy time as the boys began to get into their field rigs. One of the sergeants came to Tom just as our hero had gotten into trousers and leggings. The noncommissioned officer

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wished instruction about a part of the maneuvers. Halting in his dressing, Tom explained the point. Just as the sergeant hurried away assembly sounded outside. There was an instant outpouring of young soldiers. Tom had just time to reach down his sombrero and khaki blouse, snatch up sword and belt and rush for the door. By the time he got outside, however, he was dressed.

"How in the world did that happen?" wondered Tom, halting in the doorway in the act of buttoning up his blouse. Two of the buttons were missing therefrom. It caused him a start and a pang to see this, for our hero prided himself on his tidiness. Back in his closet he had needle and thread, but assembly had gone, and there was no time for repairs.

Walking straight up to Lieutenant Houston, Tallant saluted.

"Sir, I have just noticed that two buttons are missing from my blouse. There is no time to sew them on again. I am sorry. I didn't know they were off."

"One demerit, captain," said the army officer slowly. "As ranking officer of this battalion you should exercise even more care about your appearance than the rest. You should have known the condition of your blouse. Lack of orderliness

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is one of the worst of faults in a soldier. Take the battalion."

Poor Tom's face was fiery red as he went to his post. It was the first demerit he had received, and demerits counted against a fellow when it came time to select officers again. The red had not faded from his face by the time that the battalion swung off down the road, Lieutenant Houston riding ahead on horseback.

Each boy was the exact counterpart, save in size, of a United States regular in a campaign. In addition to the khaki uniform, each boy wore haversack, canteen, and blanket and shelter tent roll. Even the cartridge belts were full, though with dummy cartridges.

Every twenty-five minutes along the way there was a halt of five minutes. It was a warm day, and the roads were dusty; at every halt the water in the canteens was needed. Yet to boys who had had such a solid physical training, the march was more of a lark than a task. They enjoyed it hugely, despite minor discomforts.

But to Tom the pleasure of the day was gone. That demerit rankled in his mind. It was a serious thing for a Bountyville officer to receive a demerit; more serious still for the ranking officer, who naturally wanted to hold his post through the next year.

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And the more Tallant thought about the matter, the more firmly convinced he became that his blouse had been all right the last time he had hung it up in the closet.

"I remember that it was all right—I am sure of it," he asserted to himself. "The buttons weren't even loose. If they had been I would have sewed them on more firmly. I couldn't have ripped them off, either, in taking the coat down. Has anyone else been at the blouse? But who could have done such a thing? Who *would* do it?"

This was a question more easily asked than answered. Yet it would not down. It tortured Tom all through the forenoon. It was still uppermost in his mind when, after the battalion had returned, and he had donned his blue uniform and sewed the missing buttons on the khaki one, he started to walk home. Another thing that had puzzled him was that neither of the buttons could be found on the floor of the closet. He had had to replace them with new buttons.

During dinner Tom managed to keep his absorption to himself with enough success that neither his father nor his sister noticed it. After dinner he should have gone at once to his room, and labored on the maps. But he felt the need of getting out into the open air all by himself,

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and thinking over all the problems that had arisen to vex him.

He was still in his blue uniform. Going down the road a way he struck into the first piece of woods that he came to. And so, thinking, thinking, thinking, he kept on, under trees and out across open fields. No heed did he give to the direction he was taking until, after half an hour of walking, he paused and looked about him. He was in a grove of trees not far from Phil's home; he was already on the Barron land.

"I suppose I had better get away from here," he mused grimly. "I am almost afraid that it would give Phil keen pleasure to set a dog on me."

He was about to retrace his steps when he heard the sound of voices not very far away. Moreover, one of them was Phil's.

"Humph!" muttered Tom, facing the road. He did not start, however. Something kept him where he was. He moved a step or two nearer the voices.

"I ought not to play eavesdropper," he muttered, feeling more than half ashamed of the thoughts that insisted on surging through his brain. "Yet suppose Phil is planning some new trick against me? Haven't I really the right to find out if that is the case? If he is talking about anything else I can glide away at once. On the

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whole, I think I *have* the right to do this in self-defense."

That conclusion, whether quite justifiable or not, was wholly natural. Tom found himself going stealthily under the trees.

The voices came from a deep dell. Concealing himself behind bushes, Tallant slowly approached. Down at the foot of the dell, lying on the grass, was Phil Barron. Phil was in his gray uniform, but beside him was another boy in civilian dress. In build this other boy was almost the exact counterpart of Tom Tallant. He had the same light hair as our hero. Even his face fairly well resembled Tom's, though there was much more of hardness in the expression.

"Put you in the uniform, and no one could tell you from Tom Tallant," Phil was saying to his companion, with a chuckle. "And I've got just the uniform for the purpose. If ever we get a chance to try it, it'll be the biggest lark! And I guess it'll come pretty near chasing Tom Tallant out of the battalion, too."

In a twinkling the hot blood rushed to the young eavesdropper's face. Here was his enemy, plotting some new rascality against him. Tom gripped his hands tightly for a few moments, until he felt that he had gained the mastery of himself.

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Then he rose, parted the bushes, and stood looking contemptuously down the slope at Barron.

" You were talking about me, weren't you? " Tom coldly asked.

Phil leaped to his feet with a smothered exclamation. The other boy rolled over, stared curiously at Tallant, and then slowly rose.

" Listener! Spy! " cried Phil wrathfully.

" It seems I have need to be, " replied Tom, stepping haughtily down the slope. Phil said something in an undertone to his companion which our hero did not hear.

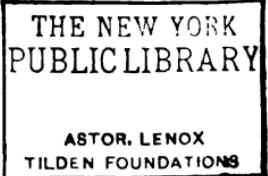
" Barron, what does this mean? " demanded Tallant, halting three or four feet off from his enemy. " What mischief are you talking of trying? "

" Listeners never hear good of themselves. I suppose you heard me giving my opinion of you, " answered Phil, growing bolder as soon as he realized that Tom had not overheard much.

" You were talking of some trick against me, " retorted Tom sternly. " Well, I'm forewarned, and so I shall be on my lookout against you. There were other tricks that I am now convinced you were at the bottom of. Let me assure you that rogues don't succeed in the long run. Phil, why can't you be decent, like other fellows? "



"'You were talking about me, weren't you?' Tom coldly asked."



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"Hear the puppy talk!" jeered Barron.
"One would think he *was* somebody!"

"I didn't come here to talk with you," rejoined Tom, turning on his heel. "I merely wanted to let you know that I understand you, now, at your full worth."

That turn was an unfortunate one for young Tallant. Phil's companion leaped at him from behind, embracing him in a way that pinned his arms to his side.

"Hold him—that's right!" cried Phil. He pulled out a whistle, blew it, and then sprang to the other boy's aid. Between them they had all they could do, for Tom, who was no mean athlete, fought with the fury of a tiger. He wrenched himself free, but they sprang at him again. Down the other slope rushed a man with heavy tread.

"Help us, quick!" panted Phil. "He's squirming like an eel!"

The man's strength carried the day against Tallant. His three assailants bore him to the earth. Face downward Tom was held, and his hands jerked behind his back. In another instant he felt them tying his wrists.

"Stop this, you scoundrels!" he cried hotly. Next, as his tormentors only jeered at him, he shouted loudly:

"Help! help! he——"

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That was all, for a handkerchief was roughly thrust into his mouth and held there. Soon after the tying was accomplished. Another handkerchief was employed in holding the gag tied into place.

"Let me see," ruminated Phil, standing up, with our hero helpless at his feet. "This place is pretty far from the road. No one ever thinks of coming through these woods. This place ought to do as well as any other. That tree over there!"

Tom was yanked to his feet by the man. Now that they were face to face, the boy recognized him. This was one of the two men who had been concerned in that Decoration Day drugging.

Dragged over to the tree, Tom was made to stand with his back to it. A rope which the man had brought along with him was passed many times around the boy's body and the trunk of the tree.

"I guess that'll do," muttered Phil, stepping back and looking over the job with a critical eye when the last knot had been tied. "He'll stay, don't you think?"

"He will, unless he can pull the tree up," answered the man, grinning.

"How do you like it?" sneered Phil. Tom met his gaze dauntlessly.

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"Oh, we'll cook a nice kettle of fish for you, now," went on the Barron youth significantly. "You'll wish you'd never been born. I'll drive you out of this town before I get through with you. Better clear out as soon as you can."

Tom's eyes looked their fullest measure of disdain.

"I'd like to give you a good blow in the face," added Phil, clenching one fist.

"Don't do it," muttered the other boy. "I'll tell you why."

Whatever the reason was, Tom didn't hear it, for the succeeding words were whispered in young Barron's ear.

"Well, by-by," said Phil, after a moment, waving his hand mockingly at the boy tied to the tree.

Up the slope went the three. Tom was left alone to wonder what it could all mean.

CHAPTER VIII

▲ YOUNG BUFFIAN BY PROXY

UNTIL the trio had disappeared from his view Tom remained motionless. But no sooner were they out of sight than he began to tug furiously at his bonds.

He first endeavored to snap the cord around his wrists. Failing in this, he strained against the rope, hoping that the knots would slip or give.

It was all quite hopeless. Though he was strong for his age, his muscles could make no impression upon his lashings.

"Now what can Phil be up to?" wondered the boy. "He doesn't mean simply to leave me tied here. There's some mischief afloat—big mischief, too, or Phil Barron wouldn't take the risk of an outrage like this. What a sneak he is!"

Conjecture, however, was useless. Besides, a mind as upright as Tom's could not fathom the wickedness that a boy of Phil Barron's nature would be capable of.

Around the bound captive all was still. It was

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only two or three times an hour that a wagon or carriage could be heard going by on the road. As for the dell, it was away down out of the view of the road, even had not the intervening trees and bushes acted as a screen. Nor was it likely that anyone would pass by close enough to see our hero's plight. These woods belonged to Mr. Barron, and he was well known to be severe on trespassers.

As time went by, however, Tom conceived a new idea in place of trying to burst his bonds. He would see if he could not, by long patient work, either wriggle his wrists out of their lashings, or else maneuver his fingers so as to gradually pick the knots.

Full of this purpose, he went slowly and coolly to work, not allowing himself either hurry or over-work, through fear that in so doing he would but draw the knots tighter.

Yet, to his chagrin, he saw the afternoon waning. Nothing appeared to be coming of his efforts. He was trying also, to dislodge the gag from his mouth, since, if he succeeded in this, he could hail the occupant of the first passing vehicle. But, despite his best efforts to get the use of his tongue, the gag remained there as if held by steel chains.

“ How Phil would rage and talk of vengeance,

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if anyone played such a scurvy trick on him!" reflected Tom.

But that thought, like his struggles, did not serve to set him free from his tantalizing position.

"I wonder if I am to be left here all night?" next wondered the boy.

This thought caused him acute alarm. There would be no great harm done to himself by such treatment, but he could easily imagine how anxious his father would be. Margery would be well-nigh frantic over his mysterious absence. She would not sleep all night, while his father would be scouring the town in search of news of his missing son.

"He would never think of looking for me in such a faraway, unlikely spot as this," Tom acknowledged to himself.

Small wonder that the boy, though of the most generous disposition, now began to think vengeful thoughts.

"I ought to make Phil smart right roundly for this," he muttered inwardly. "Yet how can I, unless I undertake to thrash him as he richly deserves? And if I do, Phil would undoubtedly treat himself to the pleasure of having me arrested. If I went to Squire Hosford to make complaint, what proof have I except my own word?

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Even if some one finds me here, and liberates me, that wouldn't prove that it was Phil who ordered this fix for me."

So it was not long before the boy began to writhe inwardly as well as outwardly. He saw no prospect of "evening" matters between himself and Phil, except by some underhanded means. Tom's whole nature revolted against such an "evening" as that.

Dark was coming on. There was no sign of his tormentors. Tallant could easily imagine how Phil was gloating and chuckling over his discomfiture. It was past dark when Tom felt the first thrill of hope. His cramped fingers had actually succeeded in easing and loosing one of the knots that bound his wrists.

"Bravo!" he cheered himself. "Keep that up, and you'll soon be able to laugh at the sneak!"

With redoubled caution and patience he assailed the next knot with his finger tips. It was difficult work, for it was only now and then that he could even touch the knot. Patience, and dogged patience, however, often accomplishes wonders. Twenty minutes later he had succeeded in getting the second knot undone. It was wonderful how fast things could be done, once on the right track.

He strained the cord gently, to see if it would

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now yield. Not yet; one knot more, and then, perhaps—

With the patience of a stoic he addressed himself to the task. Just as he was almost despairing of further success another knot yielded. Now he gave another gentle pull at the lashings. The coils began to yield!

“Hurrah!” he quivered, trembling with exultation. He became so eager and impatient now, that he could hardly control his hands and arms. It was necessary to get better control of himself.

At last his hands were quite free. In another second he had wrenched the gag from his mouth. Now he turned his attention to the rope that bound his body to the tree trunk. But the knots had been tied on the farther side of the tree; tied so tightly, too, that he could not work his way around to them.

“Fortunately that won’t keep me long,” chuckled the now happy boy.

Reaching down into his trousers pocket, he secured his clasp knife. Snip! slash! Slowly he worked the blade through each succeeding coil of rope. One after another he left them severed, until he stepped away from the last one. He was free.

“Guess they meant to leave me here all night,”

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he reflected, realizing that by now it must be at least half past eight.

Closing the knife and dropping it into his pocket, he started to move up the slope. Strange how cramped his legs and arms were! It really required an effort to get up that slope.

Once up, Tom made in a straight line for the road.

"If I don't meet all three again I'm lucky," he murmured, realizing how deserted that part of the road was.

Listening, he heard no sound. Without further delay he struck out as swiftly as his somewhat numbed legs permitted in the direction of the village. Truth to tell, he felt a little easier when he reached that part of the road where houses appeared with a little more frequency. By this time he had regained the full use of his legs. He struck out into a full, swinging walk that carried him swiftly on his homeward way.

That road led him down to the village, past the townhall. When still some distance away he made out the figures of a crowd on the sidewalk fronting the green.

"Looks like a small riot. Wonder what brings so many people together," he mused.

Still he had no suspicion of the truth. He felt only curiosity as he drew nearer. And this curi-

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osity was heightened when he recognized the uniforms of the battalion boys sprinkled thickly through the crowd.

"Guess I'll stop a minute, and see what's up," he decided. "Then I'll hurry home, for I'm afraid the folks are already worrying."

To his astonishment he heard his own name spoken as he neared the crowd. Then there was a sudden hush as some one announced:

"Here he comes now!"

A shock of first, sudden misgiving assailed the boy's heart. There was something ominous in the way those four words were sounded.

Yet outwardly as dauntless as ever, Tom Tallant walked straight up to the crowd. He saw Mr. Page standing there, and straight up to that gentleman he walked, giving him the military salute.

But Mr. Page gave him a look that made the boy's heart quail.

"Here's the young man now," proclaimed Mr. Page, pointing at Tom. "I want you to take a good look at him, and tell me whether he is the one you complain of."

A man whom our hero had never seen before stepped forward, took a swift, angry glance at young Tallant, then nodded.

"Yes. That's the young rascal."

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"Sir!" cried Tom, turning indignantly upon his denouncer.

"Silence, Tallant!" commanded Old Man Bounteous, while the battalion boys stood around in hushed awe. There was a look on their benefactor's face such as they had never seen there before. It was a look of furious wrath.

"Look again," urged Mr. Page, choking slightly. "I don't want any mistake to be made."

"A mistake isn't possible," asserted the stranger positively, though he gave our hero another look. Two more men who stood behind the stranger also scrutinized Tallant, nodding in a convinced way.

"You all declare he is the boy?" questioned Mr. Page.

Three emphatic assents answered.

With a face full of wonderment, not unmixed with great misgiving, our hero turned to Mr. Page.

"Do you mind telling me, sir, what is wrong?"

"Silence, you young ruffian!" ordered Old Man Bounteous.

That word "ruffian" was like a blow in the face to Tom. He almost staggered; then the hot, red blood flew to his face.

"That is strong language, Mr. Page. It seems

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to me, sir, that I have a right to know why you use it."

"Do you deny that you know why I use it?"

"Most assuredly I do, sir."

"Have the goodness to remain silent, then, while this gentleman answers your question for you. Do not attempt to interrupt him."

Tom bowed, then turned to the stranger who had first identified him.

"You disgraced yourself over in Fordham this afternoon," said the stranger.

"Ah! That was why Phil tied me up, and had a uniform to dress my 'double' in," thought Tom grimly. "So I have been made a ruffian by proxy!"

"You were strolling around the streets, smoking cigarettes, staring at women and girls, and making rude remarks," continued the accuser.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Tom came near laughing aloud at this announcement.

"You were insolent to a good many passers-by. Two or three people spoke to you, trying to shame you. You retorted insolently that you were Captain Tom Tallant, of Westmont, and that people who didn't like your actions would know where to find you."

Tom fairly gasped at this revelation of the full meanness of Phil Barron's plot.

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" You attacked two small boys, neither one of them half your size, and severely thrashed them. It was fortunate for you, I can tell you, that there was no one about big enough to punish you for your brutal bullying."

The mesh was thickening. Poor, staggered Tom was prepared to hear himself accused of any enormity after that.

" Not content with all this," went on the accuser from Fordham, " you had to turn thief."

On hearing this, every bit of color receded from Tallant's face. His hands tightly clenched, he needed every bit of his long training in discipline to keep him from crying out in instant, wrathful denial. But he had been ordered to listen in silence; he was soldier enough to obey.

" Yes, you turned thief," went on the Fordham man after waiting an instant for breath. " My buggy stood tied outside the bank building. You sprang into it, after untying the horse, gathered up the reins, and drove down the street at a gallop. There was no one near enough to stop you. You took the road to Westmont and, as soon as I could get a horse and buggy, I and my friends followed you. We found the horse grazing at the roadside halfway between the two towns. Later on I came over here and complained of you. I saw you earlier in the afternoon. These

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two gentlemen with me saw you, from a distance, spring into the buggy and drive off. You are a young ruffian, if there ever was one."

"Now may I be heard?" inquired Tom, turning to Old Man Bounteous.

"No!" came Mr. Page's thunderous answer.

"In justice, sir, I ask it," insisted Tom, his lips twitching.

"Justice!" echoed the old man. "Ay, you shall have that, and plenty of it!"

"But, sir——"

"Silence, I tell you!" came the stormy check. "Haven't you disgraced me enough already? Do you want to further disgrace me by making me wholly lose my temper before your comrades?"

But Tom turned his piteous glance around him, then back to the face of Old Man Bounteous. Never had he seen such wrath in those kindly eyes that had so often beamed upon him.

"Sir, if you only——"

"Tallant, you will make me forget myself if you insist on talking. Gentlemen," turning to the strangers from Fordham, "I am deeply grateful to you for exposing this flagrant conduct of one of my boys to me, painful as the discovery must be. But I ask you to leave him to me, in the assurance that he shall be dealt with as he deserves. No such boy shall longer reflect upon the good

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name of the school and battalion in which I take so much pride."

"When can I make an explanation to you?" questioned Tom palpitatingly.

"No explanations are needed," thundered Mr. Page. "Have the grace to go home. Nor need you ever put in an appearance at the school again. Go home, sir; go home and take off forever that uniform you have so utterly disgraced!"

It was quite plain that further argument or appeal would be wasted. With an inward sob, Tom Tallant turned and made his way past the silent crowd.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE HANDS OF HIS FRIENDS

“WHAT is the matter, Tom?”

Margery sprang from her chair while uttering the question, for Tom, as he entered, showed as white and haggard a face as it was possible for a healthy boy to do.

“More disgrace, I’m afraid,” groaned Tom, sinking into a chair.

Margery was swiftly by his side, taking one of his hands and stroking it gently.

“Whatever has happened, it wasn’t your fault surely?” she questioned, with all the loyalty of sisterhood.

“No; but that won’t help me, I fear.”

By dint of tactful questioning Margery brought out the whole story. Not for an instant did she dream of doubting her brother’s word. To her the whole matter was plain. She loathed Phil for his rascality. It was well-nigh past belief that a man as good and true as Mr. Page could for a second doubt this brother of hers.

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"But he will cool off when his first rage has passed," she murmured soothingly. "In the morning he will be ready to listen to you and to believe you."

"That is where you make a mistake, dear," rejoined Tom disconsolately. "Mr. Page didn't quite half believe my account of the Decoration Day affair. To-day's business will shake his faith a great deal more. Three men who could have no object in lying have positively identified me as the boy who acted so disgracefully over in Fordham. Mr. Page will want proof, and proof of the most positive kind, before he will believe me. What proof can I offer? Nothing but my own word. He has already refused to hear that."

"Father will be better able to advise you," said Margery, after a few moments of thinking. "He is upstairs reading. He was worried when you failed to be home to supper, but I told him I felt sure you had gone off for a long walk and that you had gone farther than you realized, and that you would be back some time after dark. All I can say is that you must come out of your despondency. You must go at it in a clear-headed way and plan how you are to *prove* your innocence. Father can advise you about that better than anyone else. I am going to call him now."

Mr. Tallant soon came downstairs. Evidently

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he had been prepared, in a measure, by his daughter, for he settled himself in a chair to listen gravely and thoughtfully.

"You and I will go over the ground in the morning, Tom," he said, when his son had finished. "Don't be afraid. We shall be able to clear you and confound those who have plotted against you."

Just then there came a terrific peal at the doorbell. Margery hastened out to answer the summons. She came back, followed by First Lieutenant Dick Henderson, of Tom's company.

"Don't be downcast, old chap," cried Dick sympathetically, as he strode up to Tom and grasped his hand. "I just heard of the row, and I came over here as quick as I could to tell you that I know you to be all right. There has been some dirty work done against you, but we'll pull it all straight—see if we don't! Tell me all about it, old fellow, if you're not too glum."

For the third time young Tallant launched into the narrative of what had happened that afternoon. Dick listened, with many sympathetic nods, though he did not once interrupt.

"Father and I have planned to go over to the dell in the morning," Tom wound up.

"In the morning!" echoed Dick. "Nonsense! To-night is the time. Do you suppose Phil will

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leave proof hanging around there until we make up our minds to go and find it? You go over there to-night. Even now you may be too late. I'll go over with you. Wait just a few minutes until I have time to go home and get permission to stay up to-night as late as necessary. You'll go over there with us, won't you, Mr. Tallant?"

Tom's father nodded quickly.

"I won't be a minute longer than I have to," promised Dick, seizing his cap and bolting through the front hallway, banging the door after him before Margery had time to follow him.

He was back again, with the same gust of enthusiasm, after a few minutes. With him he brought August Ruhlmann, the second lieutenant of Tom's company.

"August is going with us," said Dick. "We'd better hurry, too, I'm thinking."

Provided with a lantern, which they would not light until needed, the quartette set out, going by lanes and by-paths that they might not meet anyone and thus cause a suspicion of their errand to leak out.

They reached the dell, filed down into it, and now the lantern was lighted.

"There's the tree," whispered Tom, pointing. "And there are the bits of rope, just as I left

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them. Here's the gag," he added, attracted to a clump of bushes by something white and fluttering.

"And there's the tracks where the three left you when they went up the slope," added Dick slowly, waving the lantern over the foot-prints indicated.

"Of course we knew you told the truth, Tom," said Ruhlmann loyally. "But now we shall be able to prove it to all who doubted you. The word of all of us can hardly be doubted."

"If it is," said Dick promptly, "I shall resign from the battalion."

"Whatever happens, don't think of resigning," urged Tom. "It would be like throwing away the chance of your lifetime. But I don't care to talk much more around here. There may be some one listening whom we wouldn't care to have hear us."

"I wish there was some one near—that sneak, Barron, for instance," said Dick hotly. "We wouldn't do anything worse to him than give him the biggest thrashing of his miserable life."

"Violence wouldn't do any good," asserted Tom gravely. "He wouldn't be worth the trouble. Craft such as his can be fought, wisely, only by the most open honesty. Have you seen everything that you need to see?"

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"Yes, and I've got a piece of the rope," added Dick, snipping it off with his pocket knife. "You have the gag, haven't you, Tom?"

"Yes."

"Keep it. We'll want to show it to Mr. Page."

"Come away, then, if you've seen all you want."

Extinguishing the lantern they reached the road. Mr. Tallant took his son's hand, pressing it.

"I didn't doubt your word before, my boy. But now we'll be able to silence other doubters."

"I hope so," replied Tom. "It remains to be seen what Mr. Page will say and do."

"Do!" echoed Dick warmly. "There isn't but one thing he can do—apologize!"

"Which he'll surely do," broke in Ruhmann slowly. "He's a gentleman, and there's nothing else that a gentleman can do."

"We'll go right to his house, now," Dick proposed. "We'll make him hear and do justice to-night."

"I think we'd better wait until the morning," Mr. Tallant said quietly. "Mr. Page goes to bed early, and it's long after ten now. Wait until the morning. It will be Sunday, so we can go to his house at nine o'clock."

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"All right," called Dick, who had been walking behind with Ruhlmann. "We'll meet you there at nine o'clock."

A little farther on Tom's two lieutenants separated from him after a warm handshake. Mr. Tallant thanked both boys for their loyalty and faith.

Tom reached home much more at peace with himself than he had hoped to be. He slept soundly, though he was awake and up soon after daylight. How the time dragged until his father and sister came down! After an early breakfast, father and son set out for Mr. Page's house, walking slowly on the way to consume the time until nine o'clock. Promptly at the hour they turned into the wide avenue that led across the great grounds to the magnate's house.

"Where can Dick and August be?" wondered the boy. "There isn't a sign of them."

"They may be a little bit late," replied Mr. Tallant. "But perhaps it is best that we should have a little talk with Mr. Page before they arrive."

Stating their business to the servant who met them at the door, the callers were shown into the library. It was one of Mr. Page's practices to make himself always accessible to his workmen. Tom had been in that room many a time before,

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but now he felt out of place, for, in obedience to orders, he had put on civilian dress.

Mr Page did not keep them long waiting. He regarded Tom with a frown as he entered, then crossed the room and shook hands with the father.

“This is a sorry business of your son’s, Mr. Tallant,” was the old man’s greeting.

“It is about that we have come to see you, sir.”

“Sorry as I am to say it, of course there is no longer a place in the battalion for your boy.”

“You didn’t hear his story last night, sir. I can’t blame you for that because I can understand how disgusted and angry you must have been. But Tom has a story to tell, one that will clear him, sir, and one for which he has other witnesses than myself.”

“You believe that story will absolutely clear him of the disgraceful charges?”

“I am sure of it, sir.”

“Then I will hear it,” replied Old Man Bounteous, though there was a look of incredulity on his face.

Nor did it lessen as our hero launched bravely out into his story. Here and there his father threw in a word. The rope’s end and the gag were exhibited. Mr. Page gave polite attention,

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but it could be seen that he was far from being impressed.

"And Henderson and Ruhlmann are coming here to confirm what we have been telling you, sir," added Mr. Tallant, when our hero had finished.

"I shall be very glad to hear them, of course," replied Mr. Page. "Yet I must tell you that the identification of Tom was altogether too positive to leave much of any room for doubt. And I would also point out to you, Mr. Tallant, that if your boy was base enough to do the things with which he has been charged, it would not be unnatural for him to have the proofs which he has shown you all fixed beforehand."

"Sir—" began Tom chokingly, but could go no further. He and his father exchanged dismayed glances, while Mr. Page settled back in his chair with an expression of as great disbelief as ever on his face.

Poor Tom! He was again utterly crushed. What had looked to him, the night before, as a mass of positive evidence in his favor now proved to be as unstable as a house of cards. If Mr. Page persisted in his present belief, nothing more could be said. Phil Barron had won.

"I think, father," said the boy, rising and speaking with quiet dignity, "we might as well be

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going. Mr. Page, I am grateful to you for your patience in hearing me."

"Wait a moment," urged Mr. Tallant, who was seated near one of the windows overlooking the driveway. Here come Henderson and Ruhlmann now. They're almost on a run. Wait."

So Tom sank back into his seat again. There came a furious peal at the doorbell, and then the two boys, coming almost pellmell into the library, saluted Mr. Page with beaming faces.

"Are you satisfied now, Mr. Page?" questioned Dick breathlessly. "You have heard Captain Tallant's story, I suppose, sir?"

"I have heard his story," replied Old Man Bounteous slowly. "I understand that you are both prepared to corroborate that part that relates to finding the ropes and the gag. But I am very far from being satisfied."

"Mr. Page thinks," supplemented Tom, "that I may have prepared what you found in the dell."

"Oh, he thinks that, does he?" cried Dick exuberantly. Then, turning again to Mr. Page, the irrepressible first lieutenant rattled on:

"In that case, sir, it was a good thing that Lieutenant Ruhlmann and I did what we did. We planned it last night, on the way home. This morning, at daylight, we went back to the dell. We hid in the bushes there, and waited a long

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time. But we were repaid for it. About a half an hour ago Phil Barron came to the spot. With him were the man and the boy that Tom described to us. We knew them in an instant. It's wonderful how much that other boy looks like Tom—I mean Captain Tallant."

"And you saw that other boy?" demanded Mr. Page, while Tom, having risen, watched his two friends with a look of eager supplication.

"Saw him?" echoed Dick. "Why, sir, he was within twenty feet of us. And he and Phil Barron were chuckling about the fearful scrape they had got Tom—Captain Tallant—into. While they were removing the bits of rope, Phil was telling them that they'd have to leave town at once, before anyone saw them. Oh, the rascals! They were happy over the mischief they had caused. I felt myself turning hot," went on Dick. "My fists began to clench. I would have given a good deal to have rushed into the gang. Phil Barron wouldn't have looked as happy if I had got within hitting distance of him. I suggested to Lieutenant Ruhlmann that we rush at them——"

"And I vetoed the idea," broke in Ruhlmann gravely.

"We'd have pitched into 'em and thrashed 'em, sir, if we'd been big enough, and many

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enough," resumed Dick warmly. "As it was, I suppose the thrashing would have been the other way. We'd have got it!"

"I couldn't forget what they'd done to Captain Tallant," added Ruhlmann seriously. "I couldn't see that we'd gain anything by giving them a chance to serve us the same way. So I tried to cool Lieutenant Henderson down."

"We waited until they had cleared out," finished Dick, with an air of mournfulness over the thrashing that Phil had escaped, "and then we hurried here as fast as we could come. I hope you're convinced now, sir, that Captain Tallant is just as innocent of those charges as we are ourselves."

"So well convinced," replied Mr. Page, crossing the room, "that I ask Captain Tallant's hand; and I ask his pardon for having doubted him in the first place."

"There is no pardon needed, sir," replied Tom, happiness shining in his eyes. "You have always been just. But the case was so overwhelming against me that I can hardly blame you for thinking as you did."

"I am convinced, now, how wrong I was. What a rascal Phil Barron is! However, if he tries any tricks against you in the future, Captain Tallant, I promise that I will investigate

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thoroughly before I believe anything against you, no matter how black the proofs seem."

"Then," was young Tallant's prompt answer, "I am satisfied that Phil will scheme in vain."

"And now, captain, as you are restored to the battalion, you will listen to my orders."

"Yes, sir"—with a prompt military salute.

"Hurry home and get into uniform. That done, hasten back here."

"Yes, sir"—with another salute.

"I shall think well and carefully," continued Mr. Page, "about what to do in this matter. If, after consideration, it seems best to me, I shall call upon Mr. Barron and make emphatic complaint against his son."

"It would do very little good, I am afraid, sir. Phil would probably be able to persuade his father that we were lying about him. It is quite impossible for Mr. Barron to think his son other than perfect."

"Well, well, we shall see what is to be done. Now hurry home, and then return here. Young gentlemen," with a bow to Henderson and Ruhmann, "I am deeply grateful for what you did this morning. Had it not been for that, I am afraid that Captain Tallant would not have received justice."

Outside, Tom and his father dallied just long

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enough to thank the two young lieutenants warmly. That done, Tom went home almost at a run.

Phil Barron followed his father into church that morning in a highly satisfied frame of mind. He had heard all about Tom's disgrace, and was satisfied that this misfortune would prove lasting.

His astonishment, therefore, was intense when, just before the beginning of morning service, he saw Tom Tallant enter in his captain's uniform. Moreover, Mr. Page was with him. Thrusting his hand through the young captain's arm, Old Man Bounteous led him down the aisle to his own pew. It was a silent proclamation to all Bountyville that Captain Tom Tallant was relieved of the faintest stigma of suspicion.

"How did that ever happen?" wondered Phil, gnashing his teeth in impotent rage. "Just wait though! I'll think up something new—something that *will* settle him!"

CHAPTER X

THE SHOW THAT FAILED

WESTMONT, the juvenile part of it, had quite a sensation. Even the grown-up part of the community shared in it to a great extent.

In the window of the principal drugstore was exhibited a number of bewildering prizes. Phil and his father had decided to have a number of athletic events, under the auspices of the Barron Cadets. These were to take place at the river on the following Saturday.

Close to the bridge was the combined club and boathouse which Mr. Barron had built for the cadets. There were now two fairly expert crews for the eight-oared boats. The principal event was to be a race of a mile and return for these two crews. There was to be a canoe race, in which all the canoes belonging to the boathouse were to be utilized, with two boys to each canoe. These two events were to be open only to the cadets.

But there were to be two other events in which

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all the boys of Westmont speedily developed a great interest, since the last two events were to be open to all comers. These were a tub race and a swimming match.

For the eight-oared race a prize of a magnificent silver cup was offered. This was to be left on exhibition at the boathouse, and the names of all the winning crew were to be engraved thereon. In the canoe race the two cadets winning were each to receive handsome gold medals. The two boys coming in second were to be rewarded with silver medals.

In the tub race and the swimming match gold and silver medals were also to be awarded. In addition, each of the winners was to have one vote for the most popular girl, under twenty, who was to be presented with a toilet set in solid silver. The Fordham band would be in attendance at the races. In the evening, the Barron house and grounds were to be thrown open to all comers. The band would be again in attendance; there would be fireworks, refreshments, and all manner of pleasant surprises.

No wonder there was excitement in Westmont. Never in the history of the place had such magnificent entertainment been offered free to the young people of the town. The older ones were also cordially invited to be present.

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Never was there a more self-important youth than Phil Barron during that week. Little as he deserved it, he courted popularity. Whenever he rode by on his horse he saw the throng of young humanity around the tempting window display. He saw the eager glances which the youngsters of the place shot at him. "There he is," he heard, in suppressed undertones, and it was balm to his jealous, envious soul to find that, at last, he was surpassing the Bountyville boys, and notably Tom Tallant, in popular interest.

All the week the preparations were kept up on a magnificent scale, for Mr. Barron, with a great deal of wealth at his disposal, had resented Phil's previous unpopularity as keenly as did his son. Both father and son, seeing how much interest the coming events had aroused, were now determined that henceforth no expense should be spared to make the Barron Cadets decidedly the most-prized social institution of the place.

Early in the week, however, Mr. Page and Lieutenant Houston smiled quietly between themselves.

"I am afraid," said Mr. Page, "that Barron and his son will think I am deliberately trying to hurt their plans. However, you know quite well that I have long had my plan in view, and that

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I have not been influenced in the least by what the Cadets are going to do."

"I know," returned the army officer, with his own easy smile.

There was mystery abroad that week. Every afternoon the school at the armory closed an hour earlier than usual—that is to say, at three o'clock. Without delay the boys went to what was known locally as "the track." This was an inclosure fenced in by high boards that had once been used as a race track. After the failure of the track as a resort, Mr. Page had bought the property, having his eye on it for future investment in another direction.

Every afternoon, at a little after three, the gate swung open to admit the boys of the battalion. It was after five, each day, when they came out again. Not a word could be gleaned from any of them as to what took place during those two mysterious hours. A good many small boys, and not a few grown-up ones, tried to get as far as the fence, in the hope of peeping through, but the two watchmen invariably warned them off before they had learned anything.

In the meantime, the girls who attended Mr. Page's Saturday classes at the townhall went there now every afternoon. These girls, too,

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were equally mysterious. They were planning something, or doing something, but what it was no one could find out. Even Margery had joined these afternoon meetings.

"I shouldn't think you'd want to keep it from me," Tom insinuated coaxingly to his sister, in the middle of the week. "Whatever are you all up to?"

"Question for question," smiled Margery. "What are you boys doing up at the track?"

In an instant Tom's face became very sober.

"That's something I'm not allowed to tell."

"Same here," laughed Margery.

"It's a matter of discipline with us. We're soldiers, and when we receive orders we have to obey them."

"It's a little different with us," replied his tantalizing sister. "It has often been said that girls can't keep secrets. We're on trial in that respect, possibly. You're welcome to what I have told you."

"Thank you," acknowledged Tom, with a wry face.

Yet he had gained more of an inkling than his sister supposed he had. He knew, of course, what the boys were doing those afternoons, and he quickly jumped to the conclusion that their mysterious business had some connection with a

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pleasant surprise in line with what the boys were doing.

Saturday afternoon came around at last, as all days must in the end. Westmont was gay with color as girls and women in the full splendor of summer dress wended their way in little groups toward the river. Boys, and such men as were not employed, went in their soberer garb. A full half hour before the time scheduled for the beginning of the events, the river banks on both sides were lined with spectators. The bridge held its throng of people crowding eagerly at the rail to see the fun. The boathouse grounds, balconies, and float had been graciously thrown open to as much of the public as could find standing room there.

Out on the river, Phil Barron, in uniform and full of importance, glided back and forth in a steam launch, surveying the course and giving final instructions to the members of the two eight-oared crews, who were already in the two competing craft.

On shore his first and second lieutenants were busy in the boathouse and grounds, acting as masters of ceremonies. A few of the cadets, who were not to be contestants in the events, patrolled at the gate with bayonets fixed to their guns.

"Admit everyone who wants to come in, as

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long as there is any room left," had been Phil's instructions to his lieutenants. "Of course you will give the preference to those who appear to be the nicest people. But don't admit any boy who belongs to the Bountyville battalion—that is, not if he comes in uniform."

But, to Phil's chagrin, as he surveyed the shores and bridge from his launch, he saw not a single boy in Mr. Page's uniform.

"They've been warned to keep away," thought young Barron. "I don't care. This is the great time of the whole year, and it worries them more than it does me."

On one balcony of the boathouse the band was playing spiritedly. Every now and then a cheer came from the smaller boys of Westmont, Fordham, and two or three other near-by villages. There was animated motion, laughter, and talking among the groups of those arrayed in the bright summer dresses.

"It's a big success," thought Phil, glowing with pride. "And this is hardly a patch on what to-night's affair will be. I'll bet everybody in Westmont and Fordham—except the Bountyville boys—will be there. And *they'll* be gnashing their teeth to think they can't come."

There could be no doubting the sensation which the affair had occasioned. Everybody in

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Westmont and Fordham who was not kept away by the needs of toil seemed to be there. Phil felt a flush of added gratification when he espied Margery's sweet face amid the throng on the bridge.

It came time to start the first race—the one between the eight-oared crews. Phil gave orders to run the launch in alongside the float. Here he scrambled out, the crowd making way for him, while the judges, Mr. Barron and two gentlemen from Fordham, entered the launch in his place.

At the first pistol shot, the two boats, named respectively the *Vengeance* and the *Alert*, rowed to the line amid cheers. A second pistol shot, and, to the strains of a lively galop played by the band, the two boats were off, every member of both crews straining his muscles for the sweets of victory.

Almost the entire course was visible. Phil secretly hoped that the *Vengeance*, which he had so named in memory of his late connection with the Bountyville boys, would win. That craft, in fact, kept ahead until lost to sight at the bend just before the stakeboat was reached. After a few moments of breathless interest on the part of the spectators, the two boats came into sight again.

Now the *Alert* was slightly in the lead. It slowly increased that lead, though the crew of the

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Vengeance strained themselves to the utmost to win. Amid frantic cheers the two boats bore down upon the float from which ran the finish line. In ahead, by two lengths, came the *Alert*.

Then there was cheering! From every side came a fluttering of white handkerchiefs. The band struck up "See, the Conquering Hero Comes." Through the throng on the float a non-commissioned officer of the Cadets pushed his way, bearing the cup that was to be the trophy of the victory. Around Phil stood the boys who were to take part in the tub race and swimming match. They were still in ordinary dress, though they awaited only the word to disappear into the boathouse and reappear in their swimming suits.

Responsive to an order from the judges' boat, the *Alert* glided into the side of the float, the coxswain stepping up on the planks amid renewed cheering. Swelling out his chest like a pouter pigeon, Phil held up one hand as a signal for silence. He was ready for the presentation speech, which he had most carefully prepared with the assistance of his father.

"Victors," he commenced, "I greet you as heroes. You have proven yourselves, taken altogether, as the finest specimens of boyhood's brawn, muscle, and endurance to be found in this part of the country. Indeed, I believe you would

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compare successfully with Americans of your own ages in any part of this great republic."

He was interrupted by cheers and applause. It was noticeable, though, that the demonstration came from only a part of the spectators—in other words, from the friends and relatives of the Fordham boys, backed by a scant smattering of Westmont folk.

"For a long time, as measured by the standards of real success," went on Phil pompously, "this company of cadets which I have had the honor to command has enjoyed the distinction of being the finest aggregation of American youth, probably, that is known anywhere in the limits of this great republic of ours."

Again he was interrupted by cheers and wild applause, although fully half of the spectators declined to take part in the demonstration.

"You all know," went on the young speaker, "that there is a collection of boys who, by the belief of some, are rivals of the Barron Cadets."

More cheers and more hand clapping, but it was mixed with hisses to an extent that made it quite impossible for the pompous young orator to decide which was meant for himself and which for the Bountyville boys. His quick wit, however, saved the situation.

"I thank you for the applause," he went on,

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"and though I do not fully approve of that other manifestation against the other military concern, yet I suppose I ought to thank you for that also."

This remark brought out more cheers and hisses.

"I understand from your remarks," announced Phil, "that any allusion whatever to the other organization is out of place here. That concern is not worth mentioning at such a time as this."

Ta-ra! Ta-ra-ra! Ta-ra-ra-ra-ta! Phil knew the sound of that bugle in a second. He had heard it too often not to know all that it meant. His face underwent a quick change. He tried to go on with his speech, but the words that he had meant to say escaped his memory. He tried to think of them, but, in the awkward pause that followed, a thin voice shouted:

"Here they come! Ain't they great? Hurrah!"

That cheer was taken up by scores of throats. They who stood on the bridge all looked in one direction. The boat race forgotten, everyone within sight turned to look in one way. Those out of sight made a rush for a better view point.

Down the street, headed for the bridge, came the Bountyville boys. Ahead of them all rode Tom Tallant, a captain no longer, but wearing, on

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his shoulder straps, the gold leaf of a major. Behind him came the former B company, now transformed into a troop of cavalry, and commanded by Dick Henderson, now promoted to a captaincy. The officers wore the broad yellow stripes of cavalry down their trousers. Non-commissioned officers appeared in yellow chevrons and narrower stripes. Each boy was mounted on a dapper pony. They carried carbines, with butts resting on knees. At the left side of each rider jingled a brand-new saber. As they neared the bridge, in column of fours, the trot was slackened to a walk.

“Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!” yelled every boy within sight.

Just behind the young cavalrymen was a sight that increased the enthusiasm threefold.

What had once been A company now appeared as a battery of field artillery, under command of Captain Ned Dickson. Gunners, drivers, and flankers, they sat either in saddle or on caissons, bringing with them four new six-pounder field pieces bright as burnished gold.

Word passed from mouth to mouth. It was not to be wondered at that the crowd would not stay to hear Phil's speech when such an amazing sight was passing by. The boathouse and yard were emptied as if by magic. Even the crowd on the float bolted.

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"As I was saying, my friends," began Phil again, in a disconcerted effort to hold the audience.

But very few were paying any attention to him now. Even the boys who had been waiting their turn to enter the tub race and swimming match made a frantic bolt from the float. In their haste they surged past young Barron, pushing him into the water.

Splash! With a shriek, Phil vanished under the surface of the river. Two or three made a dismayed dash to the edge of the float, yet no one who was left appeared to know what to do. Mr. Barron, who had witnessed this unlooked-for mishap from the launch, ordered that craft quickly in alongside.

Up came Phil, striking frantically at the water. Almost immediately he had gone down again, but not before the steersman in the bow had had time to run out the boat hook. With a deft grab he fastened the hook in the sinking boy's collar. There was a moment's struggle; then up came Phil, securely hooked, but his eyes and mouth were smeared with mud.

From those who witnessed the scene came a roar of derision. Red-faced and violently angry, Phil was enabled to clutch at the edge of the float and draw himself out of danger. He was just in

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time to see the Bountyville cavalry going over the bridge; the battery was in the act of marching upon the bridge. Not one in twenty of the spectators had any time to watch the outcome of young Barron's mishap.

Drenched, disgusted, and angered as he was, Phil had the sense to see that his only hope lay in awarding the prize cup as quickly as might be. As quickly, therefore, as he could wipe the mud from his face, he hurriedly finished what he had to say. Then his appealing glance prompted his father to call the canoe race at once. There was delay, however, in starting this event, for the Cadets who were scheduled for the canoes showed an obstinate desire to stare after the mounted procession.

Worse than that, nearly all of the younger spectators followed the Bountyville parade, many of the older ones going with them. There was not a fifth part of the former crowd left to witness the remaining events.

Riding behind the battery, now out of sight, had been a boy who had freely distributed hand-bills. Seeing many of these in the hands of the spectators, Phil slyly sent one of his sentries to get one as soon as the canoe race had been started. Darting into an empty room in the boat-house, Phil hastily read the bill. His face was

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flushed hot with indignation by the time he had finished.

"The mean things! The sneaks!" he muttered, when he had finished reading. "This is done on purpose to spoil my good time."

For the handbills proclaimed that, in the evening, there would be a fancy drill, under colored lights, by the Bountyville battalion on the green before the townhall. After that the people of the town were invited to assemble in the hall, where the battalion would listen to words from its girl friends. There would be an orchestra and other entertainment present, and a pyrotechnic display at the end of the evening.

"Old Page is doing this just to try to spoil me," muttered Phil, with tears of rage in his eyes. He did not know that Old Man Bounteous had planned it all weeks beforehand. The plaudits greeting the returning canoe crews drew him outside. With a very short speech Phil presented the medals. He saw, at the same time, that his crowd of spectators was continuing to dwindle.

For the tub race only one of the original competitors remained. As there was none to work against him, this youngster claimed the first prize without doing anything for it. Phil demurred, but the youngster insisted, backed by many in the crowd. Reluctantly young Barron yielded.

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Then came the swimming match. There were but two boys left for this event. One of the pair greatly overmatching the other, the two swam leisurely across the river and back, winning, without trouble, the gold and silver medals. By this time the last of the crowd was leaving. Choruses of laughter floated back at the discomfited planner of it all.

But there remained the evening garden party. Phil depended upon the features of this affair to draw the crowd. Sure enough, the relatives and friends of the Cadets went to the Barron house. Everyone else, both of the Westmont population and the Fordham visitors, went to the townhall in the evening.

At half past seven the battalion, appearing as infantry, gave a splendid drill on the green, their evolutions being lighted by four great bonfires and a veritable blaze of red, green, and blue fires. Afterwards the Cadets marched into the hall, followed by the throng. Now the secret of the girls' mystery for the week came out. When Major Tom and his brother officers ascended to the stage, amid applause, and the battalion stood in double rank just below, twenty girls, all in white, headed by Margery Tallant, appeared upon the stage, coming from the dressing rooms at its rear. With them they brought two handsome

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flags, one in yellow for the cavalry, the other in scarlet for the artillery. Margery was spokeswoman. It fell to Tom's share to make the speech of thanks. Not being prepared for this, he stumbled a trifle in his phrases, but got through it all right in the end.

Then the orchestra struck up, and all was given over to gayety. While the grown-up folks retired to the gallery and looked on, there were promenades and games on the floor for the younger people.

Mr. Page failed to put in an appearance. He was represented, however, by Lieutenant Houston, who, in one of the lulls of fun, made a neat speech in which he spoke of the new military features of cavalry and artillery. From the battalion boys he evoked rounds of enthusiastic applause when he declared that Mr. Page was not yet through with the military innovations that had long been in his mind. Houston's further declaration that, at no distant day, the battalion was liable to be enlarged, brought out wild enthusiasm from the Westmont boys who were, as yet, too young to enlist in that favorite body.

Once more the fun went on, amid music and mirth. It was after half past nine when the crowd finally surged outside to witness the last excitement of the evening. While they had been

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enjoying themselves inside, set pieces of fireworks had gone up with the speed of magic. These were now touched off, with a profusion of skyrockets and Roman candles added. Over on the horizon could be seen the last fireworks going up from the Barron grounds. It had been an evening of bitter disappointment to Phil. Including the Cadets, the crowd at his home numbered barely a hundred and fifty people—a bare fraction of the number who had turned out to greet the Bountyville boys. Everything had gone flat with Phil and his guests. It had been just the opposite at the townhall. Not one of the young people there failed to agree that the night had been the most wonderful in their recollection.

"You didn't seem to do wonderfully well," sneered Phil's father, when the last of the guests had gone that night. "It looks as if we had been throwing our pearls before swine."

"It was all the work of Tom Tallant," urged Phil, his fists clenching. "He coaxed Mr. Page into spoiling it all for us." Then added to himself:

"But I'll be even with that fellow yet! He can't always beat me."

CHAPTER XI

A THRUST IN THE DARK

CHIPPER as a lark Tom Tallant left the armory, the next Monday afternoon, stepping over to where the rifle range lay between the hills.

He had succeeded in making good all the map work that had been spoiled for him, and was even with the hour in all his studies.

Marksman ship, though it was one of the important points upon which promotion depended, bothered him less than anything else connected with the school. With him it came natural to be a fine shot. Almost from his first week in the battalion he had ranked as a sharp-shooter.

So, with a sense only of a few minutes' relaxation, he trod down the slope to where Sergeant Heinz stood behind the rail.

True to his old army training, Heinz saluted the boy as he would have saluted anything that wore shoulder straps.

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"In good trim to-day, major?" greeted the sergeant.

"Never better, I guess," declared Tom.

"Then go right ahead, sir, and shoot those gold leaves tight to your shoulder straps."

This referred to the fact that Tom had won his major's commission only temporarily, and by virtue of his having been the ranking officer of the battalion. As there was so little of the present term left, Mr. Page and Lieutenant Houston had not considered it necessary to hold a special examination for the appointment of a major. The approaching annual examinations would settle the rank of each young soldier for the next year. As Mr. Page believed that the marksmanship of American soldiers should be kept up at all hazards, he was especially severe in the matter of target work. A certain percentage must be gained on the range to keep a boy in the battalion at all. Various higher percentages were necessary for the various grades of non-commissioned and commissioned officers.

"Captain Dickson is very close to you on marksmanship, sir," continued old Heinz.

"He may pass me," said Tom modestly, though he added wistfully, "I hope not."

As he threw open the breech of his rifle, the old sergeant shoved an open case of cartridges

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toward him over the counter. Tom fitted one of the cartridges, shot back the bolt, raised his piece, and quickly though coolly sighted it.

"At four hundred yards, eh?" asked Tom.

"Correct, sir."

Tom pressed the trigger, then, holding the piece lower, waited to see the marking brush go up. Just before the face of the target rose the brush, on the end of a long pole, worked by the marker in the pit below. For a few moments the brush hovered, as if the marker were finding with difficulty where the bullet had marred the iron surface of the target. At last he found it, and smeared it over with a fresh daub of paint, obliterating it.

"Outside the rings!" gasped Tom, with a choke of dismay.

"Zero!" said Sergeant Heinz, as he recorded it in the score-book.

"But I never made such a shot before since the first day I handled a gun," protested the boy.

"I hope it won't happen often, sir. Captain Dickson and some of the others are too close to you for you to do much of that."

"We'll see about it," gritted Tom, ejecting the shell and fitting in another cartridge. This time he sighted with great deliberation, and felt sure that his bullet would strike squarely in the center

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of the bull's-eye. He pressed the trigger, and again fired.

"One," announced Heinz, as the telltale brush went up, marking just inside the outer ring.

Tom was fairly staggered. This outrageous shooting was a thing entirely new to him. The bull's-eye counted five, each of the succeeding rings from the center standing for four, three, two, and one respectively.

Tom was trembling now. He rubbed his eyes, wondering if something was wrong with his vision.

"Steady, lad," advised the sergeant, as Tom fitted the third cartridge.

"Sergeant, I wonder if the marker is playing pranks with me?"

"Hardly likely, sir. He can't see up this way, and doesn't even know who is shooting."

"Sergeant, after I fire this third shot, I'd like to have the marker held back, and walk down there with you, just to see where the shot *does* strike."

"Nothing easier, sir. Though I don't suspect the marker. He's an honest young chap, and quick-sighted."

"I'd like to go down to the target just the same, sergeant," answered Tallant, and fired.

Immediately the sergeant pressed a button

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that rang a bell at the target. The marker's brush did not come up. Shouldering his rifle, Tom walked down the range beside the sergeant. There was the bullet mark, standing out clear in the fresh, moist paint, just outside the outer ring.

"Zero!" exclaimed Heinz, in a voice of wonder. "Mark it out, marker."

"I can't understand it," cried our hero huskily as they walked back. "I generally score fifteen in the three shots, and never less than fourteen."

"I know it," admitted Sergeant Heinz. "It must be that you've struck a streak of bad luck. I hope it won't last after to-day. Major, it makes me feel meaner than it does you to see you get such a score. But of course I've got to enter it."

"Of course," said Tom promptly.

"Major," suggested the old veteran, when they had reached the counter again, "let me look at your piece. There may be something a little out of order with it."

"I don't see how there can be," replied Tom, as he passed it over. "I take the most constant care of the piece."

Sergeant Heinz critically looked at trigger, hammer, bolt, and firing pin. All were well oiled, and appeared to be working in the best order.

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The butt was next taken to pieces, that the internal mechanism might be looked into.

"Seems all right, major," announced the sergeant as he handed the piece back. "Guess we'll have to charge it to poor shooting. Sorry, sir. You'll have to do better to-morrow, for Captain Dickson is now within one point of you."

Back to school went Tom. Seated at his desk he tried to do as good work as ever, but somehow he could not fasten his mind upon it. That wretched shooting kept recurring to him.

The next afternoon he felt flushed and feverish as, after getting his rifle from his closet, he stepped out of the armory and walked quickly toward the range.

"Steady!" he muttered. "This isn't the way to do good work. Steel your nerves, old fellow!"

"Good luck to you to-day, major," greeted Sergeant Heinz, as he saluted. "Do your prettiest work, my lad. Captain Dickson scored fifteen to-day. If you do as well, you're still one point ahead. If you make fourteen, you two are tied."

Tom fired the three shots, increasing despair following each attempt. Three zeroes had been the result.

"Too bad, too bad!" almost groaned Heinz. "That puts you behind both Captain Dickson and Captain Henderson. They're both shooting well,

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too, and at this rate it's going to be hard for you to catch up."

"If this sort of thing goes on," muttered Tom, with a wan smile, "I shall be lucky to keep in the battalion, even as a private."

"Oh, you'll pick up," declared Heinz cheerfully. "This is only a streak, sir. You'll soon get over it."

But Tom's heart beat with the acutest pangs of agony as he walked back to the armory with that unlucky rifle over his shoulder. His commission as major was lost beyond repair. That he knew quite well, no matter how well he might shoot in the future. It even seemed doubtful to him if he would hold a commission of any kind in the near future.

By Wednesday his bad luck was all over the school. It filled the Bountyville boys with intense amazement. Tom, their crack shot, their unapproachable leader at the range — that he had fallen so low and so suddenly passed their comprehension, and almost their belief. But there was the awful score book, an accusing and unimpeachable witness.

By Thursday Tom had gone below all the other commissioned officers in the battalion in the matter of marksmanship. There were even some of the noncommissioned officers, now, who

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had passed him. Tom could hardly hold his head up, so keen was his disappointment.

White-faced and trembling, almost tottering, Tom went back to the armory after that fearful fourth afternoon's work at the range. He went straight to Henderson, who, seeing the suffering in his comrade's face, gave him a silent, hearty grasp.

"Dick, this is awful," confessed Tom.

Another tremendous hand pressure answered.

"Will you help me out of this, Dick?"

"Will I, old fellow?" retorted Captain Henderson. "Just show me how."

"Get your rifle out, then, and come down to the range with me at once."

Dick awaited no second bidding. Both boys, with their pieces over their shoulders, reached the range at a quick walk.

"Sergeant Heinz," began Tom desperately, "I want to try some test shots, if there's no objection. Of course, I know they're not to go to my credit, even if they're good ones. But you have pronounced my rifle in perfect order. I want to try Captain Henderson's rifle two or three times."

"No objection, sir," promptly responded the old sergeant, pushing over the cartridges.

With Dick's piece at his shoulder, Tom fired.

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He scored a bull's-eye. Two more in quick succession he made.

"Hurrah! hurrah!" yelled Dick, fairly capering in his joy.

"You've got over your bad streak, sir. I knew you would," said Heinz, his round, hearty face beaming with congratulation.

"Sergeant," returned Tom breathlessly, "you used to be a sharpshooter in the army. There is no better shot than yourself in the State. Will you try *my* rifle?"

"Certainly I will, sir," responded Heinz. Taking the piece and loading it, he fired.

Zero!

Two more shots were quickly sent at the target. Zero! zero!

"May I be court-martialed!" growled the sergeant, dropping the butt of that unlucky piece to the ground. All were staring at one another now with an amazement through which much meaning gradually dawned.

"This rifle appears to be in the best of condition," declared the sergeant, "yet, at the same time, it's plain that it isn't worth the powder to blow its breech out."

"Foul play somewhere," said Dick crisply, his eyes flashing. Next he seized Tom's hand, wringing it warmly.

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"It's all right, old fellow, all right, all right, all right!" he cried, with a tremendous burst of enthusiasm. "We'll get you out of this slough of despond, and in mighty quick order, too. Never fear, now!"

"There's something wrong, that's sure," admitted Heinz. "I ought to have known it before. Major, will you leave your rifle here in my hands? I won't let it get out of my sight, you may be sure. Then if you and the captain'll go to Lieutenant Houston, tell him privately what has happened, and ask him if he'll excuse my asking it and come down here, maybe we'll be able to get this matter straight."

With a heart beating fast with mingled exultation and failure to understand it all, Tom strode back to the armory, his faithful friend at his side. Most of the way they went in silence.

"I hardly dare to talk," Dick confessed at last.

"Some one has been tampering with my rifle," asserted Tom. "But how was it done, and who could have done it?"

"Could it have been Dickson?" suggested Henderson. "He's in line for major, now, you know, through your bad shooting."

"Banish that thought!" exclaimed Tom warmly. "Dickson is a gentleman all the way

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through. Why, I'd as soon distrust you, old fellow!"

"None but our own crowd are able to get into the armory," went on Dick. "Even that notion wouldn't clear it, for no two of the keys are alike, and you always keep your closet door locked."

"Always."

Together, they found Lieutenant Houston. To him they quickly and privately told their astonishing story, while Houston's eyes opened wider and wider over the narration.

"Certainly I'll go down to the range, and at once. Return to your studies, young gentlemen, and don't say a word of this to anyone," was the army officer's bidding.

Tom had not been at his desk more than twenty minutes when Houston returned.

"That gun of yours has been sadly tampered with, major. The sergeant and I have been looking it over, and we think we know what the matter is. He and I are going to be at Mr. Page's factory at five o'clock, and then we will soon know what the matter is. Of course it is hardly necessary for me to ask you if you tampered with the piece yourself?"

"I did not, sir," answered Tom very firmly.

"Very well. I want you and Captain Henderson to be at the factory at five o'clock. Go each

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by yourself, by different routes, and do not tell anyone that you are going. Look for me in the office of the factory."

Nor need there be any doubt that Tom and Henderson kept the appointment punctually. There in the office they found also Mr. Page. Houston had explained to him what was wanted, and Mr. Page quickly gave his consent. Together the party went out into one of the workrooms, made use of one of the great saws used for sawing metal, and cut the gun barrel neatly in two. The lower half of the barrel, into which Sergeant Heinz could now get a good light, he critically examined.

"Just as I thought," he muttered. Then he nodded to the rest, who followed him back to the office.

"Look down that barrel, any of you," said Heinz, holding it out to whomever cared to take it first. "You will see that the rifling was notched by some one. It required a sharp tool with a long handle, and a good deal of patience, too, to do such a job as that. But you see where the rifling was spoiled. The gun simply couldn't carry straight after that."

One after another all curiously examined the barrel, finding it to be as the old army sergeant had stated.

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"That couldn't have been caused by an accident," declared Mr. Page. "It is the work of a sharp tool, as anyone can see. Some one has deliberately done this work. But who? I'd give a good deal for the right answer."

"Whoever did it," said Tom thoughtfully, "must have obtained, in some way, a key to my closet at the armory. I can't rest until I solve this mystery."

There in the office a plan was laid, by means of which it was hoped to catch the guilty one.

The next morning Tom appeared at the armory, carrying under his arm a round, portly package. He went directly to his closet, unlocking the door and placing the package inside.

"My map work—a lot of it," he explained to several of the boys who stood about.

Afterwards, at morning roll call, Lieutenant Houston approached our hero, inquiring:

"Major, did you bring the map work on which your promotion is to be based?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is it?"

"In my closet, sir."

"Let it stay there, and bring it to me this afternoon."

"Very well, sir."

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This was said in presence of the battalion. All, or nearly all, of the boys must have heard.

The morning session over, Tom and Dick disappeared. They went to a room overlooking the armory. In the wall of this room three or four peepholes had been bored. Standing against the wall, Tom and his comrade had a perfect view of the end of the armory in which our hero's closet was situated. For the next half hour all was still below them.

Then soft steps were heard crossing the armory. Quivering with expectation, both of the peepers watched and waited. The moving one below, a boy, soon came within the range of their vision. He was making his way, too, toward Tal-lant's closet. He stopped directly in front of it.

CHAPTER XII

THE MISCHIEF-MAKER

CLICK! went a key in the lock.

Tom Tallant turned hot with mortification on seeing that the mischief-maker wore the uniform of the battalion.

Before swinging the door open, the boy looked affrightedly around him to see if anyone were looking. His face was now plainly visible to the watchers.

"Sergeant Evans, of B company!" whispered Dick disgustedly.

Tom groaned with the shame of it.

"Quick!" whispered Dick, clutching his comrade's arm. "We must jump on him."

"Not for worlds," was Tom's whispered answer, accompanied by a resolute shake of the head. "We must give him rope enough to find out the whole extent of this work. See how disappointed he is."

For young Evans was now staring into the set after prowling through every corner of it.

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The pretended maps, which he was doubtless seeking, had already been removed.

After an instant the prowler shut and locked the door, dropping the duplicate key into his pocket. With swift steps he hurried from the armory.

"We know you, now, you scoundrel!" muttered Dick.

"Yes," was Tom's reply, "but we must catch his employer if we can."

"We know who that employer is, but we must get positive proof if possible, you mean?"

"Exactly."

"This Evans is the fellow who stole your other maps, pulled the buttons off your blouse, and spoiled your rifle."

"It looks that way, but we mustn't hasten to conclusions. We must find Lieutenant Houston right after afternoon roll call, and tell him what we've seen. He'll tell us what else to do."

Accordingly the two boys hastened to Tom's afternoon study room. Here they ate the food which they had brought with them. Once afternoon studies had begun, they held a conference with Lieutenant Houston in Tom's room. That officer then hurried off to find Mr. Page. He returned later with a request that the two young

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officers meet Mr. Page at the latter's home that evening.

But Mr. Page himself put in an appearance that afternoon just as the ceremony of "colors" was being gone through with, prior to the dismissal of the battalion.

"Young gentlemen," began Old Man Bounteous, in his blandest tones, just before the order to "break ranks" had been given, "I have a little announcement to make to you. You, all of you, have heard of the poor work at the range which Major Tallant has done this week. It was so plain that something was wrong with his rifle that I ordered an examination of it made. It appears that the rifling of the barrel had become damaged to such an extent that good shooting was out of the question. As marksmanship has a vital bearing on Major Tallant's retention of his present rank, it would seem too bad that he should lose his rank through a damage of which he was not aware. I therefore suggest that he be allowed to go to the range now, fire the fifteen shots that belong to a week's practice, and that the score he now makes be allowed to stand in place of the one he made with the damaged rifle. As this matter is one that concerns the promotion of others as well, I am going to put my idea to a vote, and abide by your decision. As many as are

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in favor of allowing Major Tallant to retrieve the bad work that he could not help will please say ‘Ay.’”

“Ay!” came the thundering chorus.

“Those opposed will please say ‘No.’”

Not a voice responded. Tom, thereupon, in a husky voice, dismissed the battalion. Then, accompanied by Mr. Page and the army officer, he walked down to the range. Almost all of the battalion followed. Sergeant Heinz stood there with a rifle which he had just tested. He handed it, loaded, to our hero, who fired, scoring a bull’s-eye. What a rousing cheer went up from the young soldiers! The other fourteen shots were fired without hesitation, every one of them bull’s-eyes. Then pandemonium broke loose. At a bound Tom had regained his rating as the best shot in the battalion. His imperiled standing had been restored, as far as marksmanship went.

With a light heart Tallant hurried home to study. Shortly after supper Dick Henderson called for him. Together they went to Mr. Page’s home. There they found not only Old Man Bounteous, but the army officer.

“Just by accident,” began Mr. Page, as soon as the boys were seated, “I have found out something of the greatest importance. One of my clerks, while at the Eagle Hotel to-day, learned

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that Phil Barron has hired a room there for every Saturday. Learning that, I started a thorough investigation. It has also leaked out that one of our boys, whom I believe to be the wretched Sergeant Evans, has been seen about the hotel on Saturdays. Now, it is my idea that young Barron, afraid to meet Evans out of doors, and also afraid to have Evans seen coming to his house, meets him at the hotel. To-morrow's field work for the battalion coming off in the afternoon, it is probable that Barron will meet his miserable tool at the hotel in the forenoon. Well, I have hired for to-morrow the room next to Barron's. I want you all to meet me at the factory to-morrow morning at eight o'clock. We will go to the hotel in my closed carriage, so as to escape observation. We will go to the room I have hired and see what we shall see."

There were grim lines around the mouth of Old Man Bounteous as he gave his young callers the sign of dismissal. The two boys went to their respective homes, and to bed, with a quivering feeling that the next few hours were sure to bring some things to smash.

In the morning they carried out the programme mapped out for them, the quartet arriving at Mr. Page's room in the hotel very early. There everything was in readiness. Close to the

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floor two tiny holes had been bored through the wall into the next room. Two rubber tubings ran from these holes, culminating in broad funnels.

"These," whispered Mr. Page, holding up the funnels, "we will stand over. I have already tried the effect of an ordinary voice in the next room, and find that such a voice is wholly audible here. Here, higher up in the wall, are two peep-holes through which we can look. Only one who was looking for them would find the holes in the wall on the other side. The trap is ready," finished the old man, with an ominous snap of his jaws.

The trap—yes! But would the expected game walk into it? There was a long wait, but at last, just as the town clock struck ten, there was a sound of clattering hoofs in the yard below. Pulling the curtain a trifle aside, the watchers saw Phil ride up to the horse shed, tie his horse there, and then come swaggering back to the hotel. A few moments later his step was heard in the hall outside. Some one entered the next room. Looking through the peepholes, the watchers saw Phil Barron walking up and down in the adjoining room.

Then a softer step in the hallway, followed by a tap on a door.

"Come in!" ordered Phil.

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The newcomer entered. It was Sergeant Evans.

"Well," demanded Phil hurriedly, "what news?"

"Not the best," answered Evans. "That rifle trick had spoiled all of Tallant's chances for promotion. But it was found out yesterday, and Tallant was given a chance to make good his week's work with a tested rifle. He shot off a string of bull's-eyes, and so he stands as high as ever."

An angry exclamation burst from Phil.

"But they don't suspect you, do they, Evans?"

"Don't believe they suspect anybody. It is believed to be just an accident. Yesterday I had another chance to play a great trick on Tallant."

"Yes?" asked Phil, brightening up.

"Tallant brought a big roll of maps and locked 'em in his closet. If those could have been spoiled it would have given him a fearful setback."

"And you got into the closet and did it?"—eagerly.

"I got into the closet at noon, but the maps had been removed. So that failed, too."

"It seems to me that your work is all failure lately," observed young Barron sarcastically. "Now, I've a scheme I want you to carry out.

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Listen! Do you drill mounted this afternoon or as infantry?"

"As infantry."

"Then I want you to get up to the armory early. Go to Tallant's closet, get his infantry sword, and break the blade in the middle. Then place the sword back in the scabbard as if nothing had happened. Tallant won't draw his sword until the battalion is ready to march off. Then there'll be a scene. That fool of a Houston ('Thank you!' smiled the listening army officer) will haul Tallant over the coals and give him some demerits. To-morrow night I want you to meet me in the woods near my house where we met once before, and I'll have some newer and bigger scheme to put you up to. That's all now."

"Not quite all," retorted Evans. "The money, if you please."

"Oh, yes, of course," acknowledged Barron, with a rather bad grace. Taking three or four banknotes from his pocket, he handed one of them to his tool, who pocketed it. Then Evans left the room, Phil going also half a minute later. The galloping of Barron's horse was heard in the yard below before Mr. Page broke the silence.

"Lieutenant Houston, please overtake that rascal and bring him back here. Say nothing to him,

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except that you want to see him in the hotel for a moment."

" You mean Evans, of course, sir?"

" Yes."

Lieutenant Houston went out. He came back shortly, followed by the unhappy Evans. That youngster was already white to the lips, but as soon as he caught sight of the occupants of the room, he turned as if to bolt. The army officer, however, barred the way.

" Come in here, Evans," commanded Old Man Bounteous, in a tone that admitted of no refusal. So the trembling culprit stepped into the room, advanced a few steps, and stood staring sullenly at the floor.

" We shan't need much of a conversation, Evans," went on the old man. " We heard and saw what went on in the next room. Therefore, it would be a waste of time for you to deny, or for us to listen to you if you did. So you spoiled Major Tallant's rifle?"

" Ye-es," admitted the wretch, in a faint voice.

" It was you who, a while ago, stole the maps from Major Tallant's desk?"

" Ye-es," was the terrified reply.

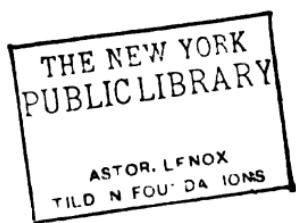
" You who cut the buttons from the major's blouse, and secured him a demerit?"

" Ye-es, sir."



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"Evans, what induced you to turn traitor to the battalion?"



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"That is all. Lieutenant Houston, will you step in next door and ask Mr. Houghton, the notary, to step up here? He is awaiting the summons."

At that Evans gave a gasp. He looked up furtively, but finding three pairs of eyes fixed sternly upon him, he looked down at the floor again.

Mr. Houghton soon came in with the army officer. The former seated himself at a desk, ready to write. Mr. Page again took up the questioning.

"Evans, what induced you to turn traitor to the battalion?"

"I—I—I needed some money," faltered the boy, after vainly seeking to evade an answer.

"For what did you need money? Your father provides you with a home, and a good one. Your education has been my care. Why did you need money?"

"I—I wanted some to spend, sir."

"Evans," broke in Lieutenant Houston crisply, "give me that package of cigarettes in your pocket."

"I—I haven't any, sir."

"Give them to me, I tell you!" insisted the army officer. "No evasion."

After a look of helpless appeal, the culprit

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produced a box half full of cigarettes. The army officer smiled significantly, disgustedly, at his friends.

"Let me look at your hands," commanded Lieutenant Houston.

Evans held them up for inspection.

"No stains on your fingers, eh? Then hand me the piece of pumice stone that you use for removing the stain."

Sheepishly the youth obeyed.

"So it was to get money for these miserable things," went on Lieutenant Houston, "that you sold yourself and became a traitor? And every boy in the battalion is on his honor not to smoke!"

Evans looked more ashamed than ever. Under Mr. Page's stern questioning he broke down completely, telling the whole miserable story, and confessing, too, that Phil Barron had paid him for his dishonorable conduct. Mr. Houghton reduced the whole statement to writing. Evans signed it, and deposed to the truth of it all.

"Now, as for you," thundered Mr. Page, "keep out of our way after this. Go home and *send* your uniform and all other property of the school up to the armory. Don't you dare come yourself. I shall send for your father and tell him why you are expelled. Go—and go quickly!"

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Evans departed, slinking out of the room, and fairly running when he reached the hall. Mr. Houghton left soon after him. Old Man Bounteous continued for some minutes to pace up and down the room in agitated silence. It was but the second time that those with him had even seen Mr. Page angry, and the sight awed them.

"Come!" cried Mr. Page, seizing his hat at last. "We will see this thing through to the bitter end—no matter who is hurt! *Come!*"

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE WARPATH

NONE others in the party asked any questions as Mr. Page led the way downstairs. The grim lines about the old man's mouth seemed to promise disaster for some one.

"Be good enough to order my carriage brought around to the front," directed Old Man Bounteous, in a tone so unusual that the hotel clerk looked up in surprise at the head framed in the doorway. Then the little party went out on the hotel porch.

When the carriage came up, Lieutenant Houston noticed that the old man gave no order to the driver, but stepped inside. Houston followed. Then Tom and Dick entered, taking the front seat.

Still no one spoke, though it was plain that all four were doing a lot of thinking.

"We are going over to Mr. Barron's house," announced Mr. Page, as the carriage rolled out into the street. "My first thought was that we

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would walk, as I felt the need of working off some of my wrath. But if Phil Barron saw us walking up the avenue to his father's house, that young man would surely run off and hide. I don't want that to happen."

Then all were silent again, though both of the younger officers throbbed with curiosity as the carriage turned in at the Barron grounds.

"Be good enough to draw the front curtains," requested Mr. Page. "I don't care to have you young gentlemen seen at first."

As the carriage came to a stop before the broad entrance to the Barron mansion a man servant came down the steps bowing respectfully to Mr. Page.

"Just say to Mr. Barron, please, that Mr. Page and some friends would be glad of an opportunity of speaking with him," desired Mr. Page.

The servant was soon back, with word that Mr. Barron would be highly delighted to see Mr. Page and his friends. Would they come to his library at once? With a grim compression of the lips, Old Man Bounteous stepped from the carriage, followed by Lieutenant Houston. Then the two young officers alighted.

Down a broad hallway the servant led them, pausing at the door of Mr. Barron's library.

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"Mr. Barron is expecting you, gentlemen," said the servant, and the callers entered, Mr. Page in the lead.

Phil's father wheeled around in his chair at his desk, rose, and came swiftly forward, his best smile of welcome on his lips.

"My dear Mr. Page, I am extremely honored by this kind visit," cried Mr. Barron, holding out his hand. Then he caught sight of those with Old Man Bounteous, and a queer look came into his face. He dropped the extended hand even before his caller had a chance to take it.

"But why *these* friends, my dear sir?" asked Mr. Barron, in a tone that betrayed both annoyance and uneasiness.

"I shall make it a point to explain their presence as speedily as possible," Mr. Page responded.

"Oh! Ah! Er—of course," assented Mr. Barron. "Take seats, gentlemen, won't you?"

Lieutenant Houston waited until Mr. Page had seated himself, then occupied another chair near-by. The two younger officers remained stiffly standing, at attention, their faces all but expressionless. Phil's father looked at first as though he intended to remain standing, but he changed his mind, slipping into his desk chair and intently regarding his principal visitor.

"I regret very much to say," began Mr. Page,

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"that our errand here is one of emphatic complaint against your son Philip."

Mr. Barron's brow clouded. His jaw set squarely, a cold look glinting in his eyes as he replied very stiffly:

"If that is your errand, and your sole errand, Mr. Page, my dear neighbor, I foresee that we may not have the pleasant chat for which I had hoped. I surmise, at the outset, that your complaint is in some way mixed up with this young man Tallant!"

"Exactly," nodded Mr. Page. "In fact, very much so."

"Then it is quite possible that I shall not care to consider the matter with you," went on Mr. Barron stiffly. "If Tallant and my son cannot manage to agree, and in fact have disputes, the principal fault that I shall be disposed to find with my son is for associating in any way with a young man who, whatever excellence he may have, is at least not my son's social equal. I am plain with you, my dear Mr. Page, as I deem it well to have it plainly understood that I am not inclined to receive all the idle stories that young Tallant may choose to tell about my son. If I need to make my position any plainer, I will try to do so."

"Is it your opinion of me, Mr. Barron,"

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asked Hiram Page, with the utmost dignity, "that I would be likely to come here in support of mere idle tales, or to press one side of an ordinary dispute between boys?"

"Then will you be good enough to state just what has brought you here, and bearing in mind where my sympathies will naturally lie?" requested Phil's father.

"Mr. Barron, will you send for your son?" pressed Old Man Bounteous.

"Why?"

"In order that he may hear and face the charges that will be made against him!"

"Charges!" exclaimed Mr. Barron raspingly. "My very dear Mr. Page, is it possible that it is necessary for me to assure you that I do not propose to have my son placed on trial here? No, very decidedly; I will not send for my son for any such purpose. If you have anything to say to me, I will listen with such patience as I can. Though I say it with all respect, Mr. Page, I am afraid that your errand here is likely to be unsatisfactory to you. My son is not to be placed on trial in my home."

"Very good, then," rejoined Mr. Page, more easily than he had yet spoken. "If you decline to have the matter properly discussed, it will be taken up elsewhere. But I had hoped you would

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understand that I would not come here with a mere idle tale or on trifling business. Since you have so chosen, Mr. Barron, the story shall be told elsewhere. I decline to go any further unless your son is here to hear what is to be said against him."

Then Phil's father began to weaken under the steady, aggressive glare that was in the eyes of Old Man Bounteous.

"Of course, Mr. Page, er—er—if you assure me that it is really necessary, or even—er—truly advisable that my son be here, I will waive my own feeling and send for him, if he be at home."

At a gesture from Mr. Barron, Hiram Page reseated himself while Mr. Barron rang and gave his orders to the servant who answered. Then all remained grim and silent until the door opened once more and Phil stepped briskly into the room. He was in full dress uniform of the gray of the Barron Cadets.

At sight of our hero, Phil gave a slight start. Then, his glance sweeping past the visitors, he faced his father with the query:

"You didn't send for me, sir, to meet some of those who are present, did you?"

"I sent for you at Mr. Page's request, Phil; at no one else's," answered his father.

"I like to be a bit particular about my com-

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pany, you know, sir," the young man went on, with a passing, sneering glance at Tom Tallant.

"Now, Mr. Page, if you will be good enough to go on with what you were saying?" suggested Mr. Barron, while Phil took his stand at a side of the room and not far from his father's chair.

"I would prefer," said Hiram Page, "that young Tallant be allowed first to tell his story of an outrage that took place lately. I will suggest, sir, that you instruct your son not to interrupt until Tallant is through."

"I trust my son needs no instruction in good manners," replied Mr. Barron somewhat stiffly.

"Doesn't he, though?" uttered Henderson under his breath.

Tom, facing Mr. Barron, though eyeing Phil briefly once in a while, began a brief, rapid, accurate account, first, of his adventure that recent afternoon when Phil and his accomplices tied our hero to a tree in the gully. Wholly at ease, or else skillfully pretending that he was, Phil listened with a sneer on his face. He did not speak, though he smiled meaningfully at the strongest parts of young Tallant's recital.

"Have you finished?" asked Mr. Barron, when Tom had described all that had happened to him, from falling into Phil's hands up to the in-

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stant of his dismissal from the battalion by Mr. Page.

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, Phil,” asked his father, “what have you to say?”

“Why, sir,” Phil replied, with an easy swagger, “as far as the yarn has to do with any alleged conduct of mine, it’s all a mess of infernal, impudent, and cheeky lies.”

Mr. Barron glanced swiftly at Hiram Page with a look that plainly asked:

“Now are you satisfied?”

“It is time to call the next witness,” said Mr. Page briefly. “Henderson, repeat what you told me on the day after the affair.”

Then Dick jumped into the breach, detailing the trip he and Ruhlmann had taken, and the result.

“More lies!” uttered Phil contemptuously, though he had changed color twice or thrice as Henderson’s recital progressed.

Dick wheeled upon him. There was a cool, calculating light in the eyes of Tom’s friend.

“Phil Barron, do you remember what you said that morning after, to the fellow who looks like Tom, at just the moment when you got down to untie the knots in the rope with your teeth?”

“Humph! I didn’t untie any knots with my

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teeth," shot out Phil quickly. "I don't do menial work anyway. Gus Ponsonby cut the knots with his knife."

"I guess that's right," Dick Henderson admitted, with a tantalizing grin. "But at all events, you have just admitted that you were there that morning!"

A chuckle escaped Henderson. Phil, biting his lips, paled as he realized how stupidly he had jumped into the trap set for him. Hiram Page smiled grimly, as he turned to the manufacturer, saying:

"Mr. Barron, you can hardly doubt now, after your son's bad slip, that my young friends have been telling the truth."

Phil hung his head, reddening more and more deeply as he realized how many pairs of eyes were turned upon him in his confusion. His father looked at him severely, next turning to Mr. Page to remark:

"It seems to me that this has gone far enough, Mr. Page. I shall question my son further when we are alone. If I find that he has been guilty of such a prank as has been alleged, then you may be sure that I shall try to impress upon him the wisdom and dignity of jesting only with his equals in life."

"Wait!" retorted Mr. Page. Then he de-

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tailed what the callers had witnessed at the hotel that morning, including the confession of ex-Sergeant Evans. Mr. Barron looked more than annoyed. Phil's bravado seemed to wither. Mr. Barron rose twice during the recital, but each time reseated himself.

"There cannot be any reasonable doubt, now, of your son's guilt, in at least two instances, of something far worse than a mere joke, Mr. Barron," finished Mr. Page, his tone severely firm. "It remains, therefore, for me to ask you what punishment you intend visiting upon your son for his highly outrageous conduct against a young man who is under my protection?"

"Punishment? For my son? Outrageous conduct?" murmured Mr. Barron, aghast. His face was purple from the violence of his emotions.

"You have understood my question as well as I could wish," Mr. Page responded blandly.

"Punishment?" repeated Mr. Barron almost chokingly. "I shall not agree to visit any kind of punishment upon my son for a mere error in judgment that led him to mix with most undesirable young men! I shall try to persuade him to go in for better company—that is all."

"I am sorry, Mr. Barron, that you do not see fit to make the way easier for me," Hiram Page retorted. "I shall be compelled, therefore, to go

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to disagreeable lengths. I shall advise Mr. Tallant to procure a warrant for your son's arrest on charges of assault, oppression, and conspiracy, and I shall assist Mr. Tallant in any way in my power in pushing the case on behalf of his son. I cannot tell you, Mr. Barron, how deeply I regret your lack of control over your son makes such a course necessary. Yet I have no doubt that arrest and trial will have a most healthful effect on your son in the long run."

"But such a trial would be a farce," protested Phil's father chokingly.

"I think you will find, Mr. Barron, that the trial will be no farce at all, but a very disagreeable reality. Whatever belief you may deny to our witnesses, I think a judge will give ready ear to them—especially in view of the trap that your son fell into just now."

Phil was leaning against a bookcase, his face white as a ghost, all his jaunty swagger gone.

"Hold on!" he protested hoarsely. "We don't need to carry this—this wretched business too far. There's some way of squaring it all."

"What do you mean?" thundered his father. "Young man, do you admit every one of these charges that have been made against you?"

Phil tried to speak. Two or three times his

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lips parted, yet the words seemed to stick in his throat.

"The young man doesn't seem to deny them," clicked Mr. Page.

Mr. Barron looked somewhat disconcerted at the turn of events; somewhat disgusted at the sudden white feather shown by his son.

"Well, well, my dear Mr. Page," went on the other manufacturer coaxingly, "leave us now, and I promise you I will have a very serious talk with my son later in the day."

"That won't do," declared Hiram Page bluntly.

"What do you demand, then?"

"I insist, Mr. Barron, that you pledge yourself to punish your son in some manner to be determined upon by us, and that the punishment be made to fit the nature of the outrage inflicted upon my young friend, Thomas Tallant. I must know what that punishment is to be before I leave here."

"And if I cannot see my way to—" began Mr. Barron slowly.

"Then we will go from here to the office of the justice of the peace," broke in Mr. Page firmly. "We will ask for a warrant for your son's arrest on the charges I have already named to you, sir."

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Mr. Barron himself whitened now. Hiram Page was known usually as a very mild-mannered man, who could be as hard as iron when he deemed his cause unusually just.

"I shall agree to your terms, then, Mr. Page. Name the punishment, and I pledge you my word that it shall be inflicted upon Phil."

Old Man Bounteous wheeled upon our hero.

"Tom!" he cried. "You were the victim; you shall be the judge. Name the punishment!"

CHAPTER XIV

PHIL BRINGS IN THE WHITE FLAG

TOM TALLANT started in astonishment. A cry, half of amazement and half of rage, escaped Phil Barron.

"Name the punishment, Tom," repeated Hiram Page insistently.

"He!" cried Phil, turning to Old Man Bounteous, though he pointed to our hero. "He punish me? He choose the form of my humiliation? Then he'll waste his time, as you'll waste yours, sir. I won't submit to anything of the sort!"

"Philip!" broke in his father sternly.

"I don't care, sir. I'm not going to have this beggar lording it over me and standing as my judge," broke vehemently from young Barron.

"You will oblige me by remaining silent, young man," retorted Mr. Barron grimly. "It seems that you have allowed yourself to break all the rules of right and wrong. Now, you shall remain silent while others decide what is to be done in your case. Stand away!"

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Finding himself deserted by his most natural ally, Phil shrank back, panting, his color running high and his eyes gleaming wickedly. He was staring hard at Tom Tallant now, and looked about to spring.

"Go ahead, Tom," urged Mr. Page again. "What is the punishment for young Barron's great offense to be?"

"I don't like to decide, sir," rejoined Tom in a low voice.

"Why not?" Mr. Page's voice rang as sternly as at any time during this remarkable scene. He seemed now to include our hero in his great resentment.

"I'm too angry to be able to decide fairly; that's why, sir," Tallant responded, looking his benefactor resolutely in the eyes.

"You can't trust yourself—eh, Tallant?"

"I don't know, sir. But I don't want to make the decision."

"Then wait a moment and let me think. Perhaps I can suggest something suitable of which you will approve," resumed Mr. Page, with a serious nod.

There was silence, then, for a full minute. The nearest to a disturbing sound that came to the ears of those present was the heaving breathing of Phil Barron.

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"Well, I think I shall suggest——" began Mr. Page slowly.

Every eye was on him. Everyone in the room seemed suddenly to stop the act of breathing. Mr. Page was not lost for words, but seemed to be trying the effect of his own idea upon himself.

"It appears to me," he continued, "that the least we can insist upon, within merciful bounds, is a full and explicit exposure of young Barron's recent conduct. Every man, woman, and child should know how meanly, basely, he has tried to blacken our friend Tallant's character, and all because of envy and hatred of one much better than himself in every respect. Yes, Tallant, I think I would suggest that you insist upon a full, public exposure of the rascal. Then let the public contempt teach the offender how dangerous a thing it is to tamper with the good name of others."

"I won't stand for anything like that!" burst hoarsely from Phil's lips, as he took a step forward, his fists tightly clenched and his face chalk-white. "I won't have it! I won't agree!"

"How will you help yourself, sir, in case we take this matter into the police court instead of adjusting it here and now?" demanded Mr. Page coldly.

"My son will agree to whatever seems right. He will have to, for I will force him to it," put

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in Mr. Barron. "Yet, my dear neighbor, is it not a bit severe to insist upon such a public exposure of the young man? What good can be accomplished by that?"

"Thomas Tallant is the judge in this case," responded Mr. Page dryly. "What have you to say to the public exposure, Tallant?"

"For one very strong reason, I don't like it, sir," replied Tom instantly.

"Why don't you like the idea?" Mr. Page pressed.

"There's an old saying, sir, about giving a dog a bad name, and then he'll deserve it."

"Do you mean to call me a dog, you—beggar!" shouted Phil, taking so quick a step forward that some of those present thought he was going to strike his rival. Mr. Barron hastily pushed his angry son back.

"No; I don't call you a dog, whatever I may think on the subject," Tom retorted, eyeing Phil coolly, disdainfully. "What I wish to say, Mr. Page, is that I'm afraid such a public exposure would make a dog of Phil Barron in his own eyes. Once make him a dog, and he'll always be one!"

"Then come, come, Tallant!" Mr. Page insisted impatiently, "tell us what is to be done with the offender. I have suggested, and it hasn't helped you any. Now, do your own thinking, and

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let us know the result within the next minute, if you can."

"Why," Tom answered at once, "it seems to me that, as I have come out unscathed after all Phil's mean plotting, I may as well be satisfied now with an apology."

"I apologize! To a thing like you!" Phil demanded sneeringly. "Humph! Beggars seem to have queer notions. I won't apologize and that's all there is to it. Apologize to Tom Tallant, indeed!"

"Be silent, young man!" interposed Mr. Barron harshly.

"Of course," Tallant went on, as though he had not heard his rival, "I don't mean that a mere verbal apology would be satisfactory."

"Oh! Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Barron, looking mystified.

"It would have to be a written apology, Mr. Page. It would have to admit the things that Phil has done to injure me. He would have to express regret for his acts, and conclude with a personal apology to me."

Phil tried to laugh, but the sound was a discord.

"And you think you would be satisfied with such an apology, Tallant?" Hiram Page asked thoughtfully.

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"Not exactly satisfied, perhaps, sir; yet it seems to me that it's all I ought to demand if I'm to be judge and jury on my own wrongs."

"Perhaps, then, if the apology and the statement are very full and exact, I shall decide to be satisfied also," Mr. Page announced slowly, as though still much in doubt.

"Satisfied! Humph! Yes; you will be when you get such a statement from me," grunted young Barron.

"Phil!" cried his father warningly. "Are you speaking disrespectfully to one so much your elder as is Mr. Page?"

"I—I didn't mean to say it that way, sir. But Tom Tallant, when he puts on such lordly airs, makes me so wild with rage that I can hardly think of what I'm saying to others."

His father, seeing fit to ignore this childish speech, turned to Mr. Page to say gently:

"Sir, on behalf of my son, I accept the terms, and with my son's thanks."

"Oh, you do, do you, sir? Perhaps I'd better be allowed to do a little of my own thinking in such a—"

"Confine yourself to your thinking, then, Philip," retorted his father sarcastically. "No more speech from you in this room. Go straight to your own room, and at once!"

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For a moment it looked as though young Barron would defy his father outright. Indeed, the young man had that notion for a few seconds. Then, flinching before his angry parent's glare, Phil turned, stalking out of the room. Nor did he neglect to bang the door behind him.

"You'll excuse me, won't you, Mr. Page?" asked Mr. Barron. "I believe that it will be better for me to follow my son to his room. Then I can make sure that the apology is written in the most satisfactory form."

As the door closed a second time Hiram Page sank into a chair, sighing as though wearied of it all. He sat staring straight ahead without speaking. The others looked at the old man, then glanced awkwardly at each other.

Phil, when his father entered the former's room upstairs, stood at one of the windows, his breast heaving, tears coming slowly down his sullen-looking face.

"Why are you not seated at your desk, sir?" his father demanded grimly.

"What for?" Phil queried shortly.

"You are going to write that statement and apology!"

"Pardon me, sir. But I don't believe that I am!"

Mr. Barron did not show surprise. He

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was well used to these scenes with the young man.

"Phil, you will sit down and write just such a paper as Mr. Page wants," his father commanded.

"Such a paper as that sneak, Tom Tallant, wants, you mean!" Phil cried, wheeling around and doing his best to look the part of outraged patience.

"It makes very little difference who wants it, or whom it shall please, young man," retorted Mr. Barron crisply. "The fact is that you have made a fool of me as well as of yourself. You have disgraced the family name. Now, you simply must have the grace to write what is wanted."

"Not a line of that miserable stuff will I write, sir!"

Phil had often won in former disputes with his father. He hoped to add another victory now, for he rather prided himself on possessing a will stronger than his parent's. For once, however, the young man had too slight an idea of how stubborn Mr. Barron could be.

"Very good, then," said the latter coldly. "If you are not going to use your desk and stationery for writing, then I will seat myself and do some writing of my own."

"Now, you needn't think I'm going to sign

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anything that you write," cried Phil impudently, as Mr. Barron occupied the chair before the desk.

"Your signature would be out of place on what I am going to write," replied his father frigidly. Curiosity got the better of the young man.

"Why, what are you going to write, sir?" he inquired.

"I am going to write my personal promise to Mr. Page that the Barron Cadets shall be disbanded at once!"

"Huh! Yes, you will!"

"And I am going to add to that my further promise that, beginning with Monday morning, you shall enter my mills, there to work in the mechanical department as apprentice, and for ten hours daily on every working day during the next two years. Also, that during that time you shall receive neither wages nor spending money."

Phil looked and felt staggered. Could this really be his father, the parent who usually yielded in the end?

"Huh! Don't think you can scare me by that sort of talk," growled the youngster.

"I'm not trying to scare you now. I've given that up, Philip. Instead, I'm trying to appease Mr. Page, so that he won't have you dragged into court and punished by the authorities, as he cer-

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tainly intends doing if you don't behave as you should. As to my meaning what I shall write to Mr. Page, you know full well, young man, that I have the greatest regard for any statement that I sign. I am writing and signing this promise to Mr. Page as the best guaranty to myself that I shall not afterwards be tempted to go back on my present plan."

Mr. Barron dipped the pen in ink and turned to write.

"Hold on, sir!" cried Phil hoarsely.

"Oh! Are you going to come to your own senses?" questioned his father, looking up at the boy's white face.

"Why can't I speak this apology instead of writing it?"

"Because that wouldn't satisfy Mr. Page."

"But I can't write and sign such a paper, father."

"Then be good enough to remain silent while *I* write."

"Hold on!"

The voice was one of sharp entreaty at last. Mr. Barron wheeled, rose, thrust the pen into Phil's right hand, and firmly pressed that young man into the chair just vacated.

"Now, write yourself, Philip, without objection or nonsense. You needn't attempt your own

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composition either. I will dictate the words; you set them down. Now, then, begin!"

Phil sat there scribbling in sullen silence as the words came slowly from his father's lips. The boy's scowl deepened, however, as he turned on to the second page of foolscap paper. Yet he wrote without speaking a word, something in his father's cold voice convincing the young man that the danger line had been reached. Then, at last, came the windup of the statement—the apology.

"Sign here!" ordered Mr. Barron. Phil obeyed.

Without a word further the manufacturer bent forward, taking up the sheets and going over with them to the nearest window. He read the written matter through carefully.

"I trust this will satisfy Mr. Page," said Phil's father at last.

"Humph!" growled his son.

"Come downstairs with me, and we'll have a reading of this before all interested in this affair."

"Can't you let me out of that part of it, sir?" pleaded vanquished Phil, drawing back.

"No! Come!"

Young Barron followed his father back to where the Bountyville party awaited them. Mr. Barron handed Phil's statement and apology to

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Mr. Page, who, without glancing at the pages, passed them on to our hero.

"Read it aloud, Tallant," requested the old man.

Tom did so, even to the signature.

"Does that satisfy you, Tallant?" queried Mr. Page.

"Fully, sir." But Tom spoke with an effort. Though he tried to forgive, he could not all at once forget the miserable acts that this paper confessed.

"I assume, Tallant," broke in Mr. Barron huskily, "that since this paper takes the place of a public exposure, you do not intend to exhibit the paper freely? That you will regard it as—er—somewhat confidential, and to be kept only as a guaranty of Philip's future good conduct? Am I correct in so thinking?"

"It shall be as Mr. Page says, Mr. Barron," Tom replied, handing the sheets back to Old Man Bounteous. "I ask Mr. Page to do me the favor of taking charge of this document for me."

No one appeared to notice that Phil had left the room softly and hastily. Now the callers rose, feeling that a painful business was well over. Mr. Page turned to their host, saying:

"Of course, you understand, my dear sir, how disagreeable this business has been for me!"

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"It has been painful all around, my dear neighbor. But I hope it is settled in a way to stay settled."

Mr. Barron followed his callers to the outer door, even going out on to the veranda as the Page carriage came up.

"I feel very certain that we shall have no further trouble, Mr. Page," said their host. "I am positive that Philip's conduct hereafter will be such that none of you will have any cause to complain of it in any respect."

Phil Barron, listening from the near-by reception room, peering out through a lace curtain, smiled in a disagreeable way that might have undeceived his father had that gentleman seen his son's face at that moment.

"There you go, Tom Tallant—as proud and conceited as ever. I suppose you think you hold a mortgage on my soul, now! We shall see! My turn is coming! It's almost here!"

CHAPTER XV

OFF AT THE ROUTE STEP

PHIL, on his saddle horse, dressed with the utmost care in riding costume, slowed his mount to a walk and turned in toward the curb. He dismounted with all the grace he could, though there was a bit of pompous stiffness in his movements that was a part of him. Hat in hand, he awaited two oncoming girls.

Very pretty girls both were in their daintiest of summer white finery. Grace Ford, slightly the elder, was tall and dark, with sympathetic brown eyes and a small mouth that denoted firmness at need. Bessie Stanhope, the younger, was blond, almost of the golden order, and a little shorter than her friend.

Phil hardly knew which he admired the more, though he thought he rather preferred Grace's dark, pretty face. Both nodded smilingly as they caught sight of him.

"Strolling?" asked Phil, for want of a better remark, as the two girls stopped on reaching him.

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"Not altogether," Grace answered. "That is, we have an object in view at the end of our walk."

"I don't suppose you'd mind my leading my horse and walking along with you," Phil observed.

That wasn't exactly what he wished to say, but the knack of happy expression was seldom young Barron's.

"We shall enjoy your company, Phil," Grace answered demurely.

"Thank you."

Throwing the bridle over his left arm, Phil turned and walked beside the girl.

"You might even stable your horse and go with us for the afternoon," suggested Bessie, half mischievously.

"Ah, then you're going somewhere—on pleasure bent?" queried Phil.

"Yes," Grace replied. "I don't know why you shouldn't enjoy going with us. No invitation is required."

"Except yours," Phil murmured, with an attempt at gallantry.

"Suppose you mount, then," suggested Bessie, "and ride on to the hotel. Then you could have your horse stabled and be ready by the time that we get along there."

"Delighted," Phil responded readily, as he

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paused, and the girls halted also. "Is this to be an all-afternoon affair?"

"Yes," Grace nodded.

"Where are you going, may I ask?"

"Why, where nearly everyone else in Westmont is going this afternoon, I fancy—to the Bountyville armory to see the graduation exercises. Not exactly graduation either, since none of the young men leaves the school. But it's the day of the end-of-the-school-year exercises."

"Bountyville!" uttered Phil Barron, in a tone of deep disgust.

"Why, yes; didn't you know that this is the afternoon?" Grace inquired, looking at him in considerable surprise.

"I don't have anything to do with that—that mob!" sputtered Phil, turning white and red by turns. Somehow, he felt greatly embarrassed, with Grace's soft, clear eyes looking him over so curiously.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" Grace went on, a moment later. "I knew there was some rivalry between your Cadets and the battalion, but I didn't know that it went so far as actual dislike."

"Oh, it isn't that," protested Phil rapidly. "It isn't what you'd—er—call dislike. It isn't as important as that. Only, of course, I don't look upon the Bountyville boys as being entitled to

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much consideration. They're — er — nothing but the sons of workingmen, you know, and a lot of fellows of no consequence in any way. Really, I'm a little surprised at girls in *our* set going to any of the affairs of the Bountyville boys."

"At least, Mr. Page is in what you call 'our' set," Grace retorted rather coldly. "This battalion, and the school at the back of it, make up his pet hobby and thought in life."

"Then you're really going — there!" Phil asked awkwardly.

"Certainly we are," Bessie smiled.

"Wouldn't you young ladies rather go somewhere else? I think I could get my father's man and automobile for this afternoon. The country is really beautiful this week," stammered Phil, his embarrassment increasing under the steady regard of Grace's eyes.

"No; we wish most to go just where we are going," Grace answered, with a firmness that the young man found disagreeable just at this moment. "Can't you, on the other hand, change your mind and come with us?"

"I!" echoed the flustered Phil. "Good gracious, no!"

"Well, good-by, then," suggested Grace.

"Good-by, Mr. Barron," supplemented Bessie. They went away together, leaving young Bar-

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ron standing there, feeling fully as uncomfortable as he looked. Had the girls been poking fun at him from the outset, he wondered. They were laughing now, a little way up the street. At him?

He trembled as he turned to step over to the nigh side of his horse and mount.

"I guess they couldn't have heard anything about that scene at our house," he murmured grimly. "So they were just teasing me. But why should they want to make a fool of me? That was never like Grace."

Then all of a sudden Phil became seized with a desire to attend the school exercises. He was tired of being on the outside with everybody, nearly, in Westmont. He could escort the girls and be sure of no affront from the Bountyville boys while in their company. It would take some assurance, to be sure, for him to enter the Bountyville armory, but Phil was not lacking in "nerve" when he really wanted to do a thing.

"I believe I will go! Yes; I will!" he muttered as he stepped into a stirrup and quickly mounted. At an easy lope he soon overtook the girls. They turned as they heard him coming, though they appeared a bit surprised as Phil turned in at the curb and dismounted.

"Have you changed your mind?" asked Bes-sie, almost teasingly.

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"I certainly have," Phil replied. "The company is too charming for me to hold back any longer."

"Good!" cried Bessie gayly, while Phil was sure that Grace's dark eyes were gleaming with pleasure now.

"I'll ride ahead and join you in front of the hotel, if I may," proposed Phil.

Both young ladies assenting, Phil again mounted and went off down the street at a fast canter. As he wore detachable bootlegs, and left these at the hotel stables, his attire did not look out of the usual for an afternoon affair in little Westmont. As the girls came along he joined them.

Bessie, whether purposely or not, managed to keep the conversation mostly on the subject of Hiram Page's pet scheme. As they strolled along they became mixed with other streams of humanity pouring toward the armory.

"After all," wondered Phil, "why can't there be peace between the Cadets and the Bountyville boys? It would make things a whole lot pleasanter all around, and I could always manage to make Tom Tallant and his cronies keep at a respectful distance. I half believe I'll let the Bountyville boys patch things up with me. I'll think it over, anyway."

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It didn't appear to occur to him that perhaps the Bountyville boys would at least expect that any decided overtures should come from his side. Wasn't he giving them a fair opening by attending their exercises?

"This will please dad, too," he thought, beginning to be very well satisfied with himself as he entered the familiar school grounds between Gracie and Bessie. "Dad has been at me to have no more rows with Page's pets. Oh, well, I might do worse than to have some sort of an understanding with Page's pets. But they must know their place if I do."

A good many people stared curiously at young Barron as he entered the armory with the girls. But Phil, feeling loftily above most of those present, paid no heed to the many looks directed at him.

It was an afternoon of enthusiasm, and the music of the orchestra that was present helped to put everything in harmony. Even Phil's resentment began to vanish as he listened to the address by Hiram Page, in which that gentleman outlined the aims of his unusual school. There were remarks by the teachers, including Lieutenant Houston. Two or three of the prominent men of the village had something to say. While everyone else present was carried along to the enthusi-

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astic conviction that never before had there been such a school, or such a prize lot of boys, Phil was admitting to himself that the Bountyville life wasn't "half bad."

"After the addresses by the "grown-ups" several of the young men of the battalion delivered addresses or read essays. There were exercises and declamations. Last of all, Mr. Page himself read the percentage records of his young student soldiers, and announced the list of officers and noncommissioned officers for the coming year.

Tom Tallant had succeeded in retaining his commission as major for the coming year. For that matter, all of the commissioned officers of the battalion had succeeded in keeping their relative ranks, the few changes being among the non-commissioned officers.

While these announcements were being made, the battalion, in dress uniforms and with side-arms only, stood in close formation on the stage, Hiram Page standing so that he looked partly at them and partly at the audience. There was much applause when Old Man Bounteous finished. Then some one started cheering, and in a moment the armory was full of the din of rousing voices. As the cheering died down the strains of the orchestra rose, playing "The Star-spangled Banner." The young soldiers stood at attention,

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eyes down, while the audience rose until the last bar of that grand old air had been played.

"Thank you all," called Mr. Page heartily. "Now, for the next hour, the young gentlemen of our school will place themselves at the entire service of any who wish to be shown through our various departments."

At Tom's quiet command the battalion broke ranks, the boys leaving the stage in orderly fashion by the stairs at either side.

"Well, we've seen it all now, and I suppose we may as well go," murmured Phil to Grace, as he stood turning his hat uneasily in his hands.

"Wait just a moment, won't you, please?" begged Grace. "Here comes Margery Tallant, a very sweet girl. We've met her at the cooking school. And I think she will want to present her brother to us."

Phil's face flamed. He fidgeted, but didn't quite see how he could get away from this predicament.

"Oh, after all, I might as well face it out," he decided. "If there is ever to be any peace patched up between us I shall have to give Tallant a chance to speak to me, of course."

So Phil waited, wondering just what would be the most tactful way of meeting our hero. Tom had joined his sister, who had taken his arm, and

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the pair came down the aisle. If Phil felt stiff and uncomfortable, the young major appeared wholly at his ease.

Grace and Bessie greeted Margery Tallant, who at once presented her brother. Both Grace and Bessie offered their hands to the young officer.

Then, pleasantly, Tom turned and held out his hand to Phil with soldierly courtesy. Whatever Tallant may have thought, he was not going to put any smallest slight on the escort of the young ladies to whom he had just been presented.

"How do you do, Captain Barron? I'm very glad to see you here."

Captain! And Tom wore the gold leaf of the major on his shoulder straps! It looked like a direct hint of Phil's inferiority—in rank at least. So it struck Barron, though it occurred to none of the others in that little group, least of all to Tom himself.

Phil's lip trembled. He flared, quick to take offense where none had been even imagined, and drew himself up pompously, holding his hands behind him.

"I am very well, thank you, Tallant," he replied. "No; I don't care to shake hands!"

The young ladies looked thunderstruck. Tom bit his lip slightly, flushed, bowed rigidly, then

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turned his glance at the girls. The awkward silence was broken by ready-witted Grace's voice:

"Oh, Major Tallant, won't you be good enough to be our guide through the school? I am sure you can show us everything in its most interesting light."

"I shall be delighted as well as honored," Tom replied, without a quiver in his voice.

"Good-by, Phil, and thank you for coming with us," said Grace, in an odd, cold, little voice, as she merely glanced in the direction of the Baron heir.

Then she turned and walked away with Tom, who was thanking her inwardly for her quick passing of an awkward situation.

Awkward! What of Phil, then, who had been most justly punished for his snobbishness! He was all but gasping. Grace had managed the matter so swiftly and neatly that it left him without a word to say, with nothing to do but wince under the covert looks of hundreds of eyes.

"Well, if that fellow Tallant doesn't take the puppy prize!" ejaculated Phil to himself. "And just as I was on the point of giving him a chance to close the old breach! He had to call the attention of everyone to the fact that I am only a captain, while he's a full-blown and very important major!"

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He stood there, red-faced and mortified, watching Tom stroll away with the fairest of the fair present that afternoon. Then, starting suddenly with a well-defined notion that he was being secretly laughed at by many of the "common herd" in the armory, Phil suddenly faced about, with a click of his heels, going down the aisle stiffly through the yielding throngs. At the very rear of the armory Phil felt himself under the gaze of scores of Mr. Page's workmen and their wives. Then he reached the outer air, taking a hurried, angry stride toward the hotel.

"You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear at any time!" Phil told himself, in angry self-justification. Nevertheless, he had an uncomfortable feeling, one that grew rapidly, that he had himself been at least wanting in tact in not letting Tom's slur pass unheeded. The chance for any reconciliation was gone for the present, anyway. Would another chance arise?

Meanwhile Major Tallant, wholly at his ease again, was showing the young ladies through the various departments of the school. When Grace got an opportunity to speak to him alone, she murmured:

"I am very sorry, Major Tallant, that our escort should have seen fit to be rude to you."

"It was nothing," Tom replied lightly. "I

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had almost forgotten it. There was a little disagreement between us once, you see, when Phil Barron was an officer in the battalion."

Tom went up several notches in the good opinion of Grace Ford, who knew much more about the rivalry than he had just told her.

In the evening there was a short ball at the armory, which Grace and Bessie attended in the care of the former's parents.

The school year of work was over. Full play-time had come in earnest. At seven the next morning the Bountyville battalion, khaki-clad and carrying full field equipment, swung from battalion front into column of fours at the young major's command. They were away for their summer of camping, marching, drilling, maneuvering—off at the soldier's route step!

CHAPTER XVI

THE ENEMY IN THE FIELD

ONLY Lieutenant Houston, his one young orderly, with Tom and the latter's orderly, were mounted. Later on the cavalry and artillery ponies were to be sent up to camp, but this was an infantry practice march—a long one, too, of something more than fifteen miles, part of the way lying among the hills.

Yet for the Bountyville boys, with their drills and marches through the winter, and with each young soldier in the best of condition from gymnasium work, the march, loaded though they were with the usual field haversack, canteen, and combined blanket and tent roll, was not a hard one.

It was part of the army officer's plan to have this day's march conducted as one would be in a country where an enemy lurked.

There was, therefore, well ahead of the main column, a small advance guard under Lieutenant Ruhlmann. At some distance to the rear of the main column was the baggage train, consisting of

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some dozen heavily laden wagons, this under escort of the rear guard, commanded by Captain Dickson.

"It will be well, major," declared Lieutenant Houston, who now ranked with the battalion as a lieutenant colonel, "if you send out flankers from time to time to prevent any surprises. The advance guard might be allowed to pass, you know, by some heavy force of the enemy waiting to fall either upon the main column or the baggage train."

The army officer spoke as seriously as though such a danger actually existed, and as if these sleepy country villages through which they were passing constituted a real theater of war.

Tom had the map of the route with him, a map that showed every road and path, every stream, bridge, and other object that could be of interest to a military officer on actual service. Wherever he saw a tactical possibility of a surprise he detached a small party of flankers, under one of his officers, to go forward on either flank, making sure that the route was "safe."

With the direction of these flanking parties Houston preferred to have nothing to do. Instead, he made notes as to points on which he would express approval, or otherwise, at the end of the day's march.

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"I wish we were on better terms with the Baron Cadets, sir," said the young major, with a smile, during one of the halts.

"Why, particularly?" asked Lieutenant Houston.

"Why, then, sir, we might have been able to arrange to have this day's march made lively in earnest."

"By having the Cadets make sham attacks upon you at certain points, and try to outmaneuver you!"

"Exactly, sir."

"Oh, you may find some kind of excitement along the road to-day as it is," spoke the army officer carelessly.

Tom started, looking at his instructor keenly, wondering whether Houston had arranged some military surprise of which our hero had not been informed.

At noon a long halt was made in a field, permission having been previously secured. Here the young soldiers scouted for wood and water, and soon more than a score of campfires were going, with the smell of sizzling bacon in the air.

Yet, once the meal was over, the young soldiers were allowed but little time for rest. "Assembly" sounded and the young men fell in, resuming the line of march.

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"I am going to send Lieutenant Paxton out on the left flank, sir, with a flying column, to inspect the road and make sure that it is 'safe country' ahead of us," Tom declared, as he and the army officer rode along side by side. "What I wish to ask, sir, is whether there would be any objection to my going with Lieutenant Paxton's column? I wish to see how the column performs its duties."

"You may go, then," nodded the army officer. "First, turn command of the main column over to Captain Henderson."

Tom not only turned the command over to his chum, but his mount as well. Then, on foot, Tom trudged off at the next turn to the left, just behind the little detachment led by Lieutenant Paxton.

A quarter of a mile down this flanking road was a small bridge. As they came in sight of it, Paxton, striding ahead of his detachment, held up his sword with a movement that was a silent command to halt. Unslinging his field glasses, Paxton took a long look at the vicinity of the bridge, then examined the road up past the other side of the bridge. Tom had come forward to his lieutenant's side.

"I don't just like the looks of the country beyond, sir," Paxton reported gravely.

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"Afraid of that timber belt up at the left of the road?" queried Tom, with equal gravity.

"It looks ugly, sir," Paxton went on. "A force of the enemy could lie concealed there and pick off about all of our men as we tried to cross the bridge."

"Then take your precautions, lieutenant, but advance. We are losing time, and the main column will soon be far ahead of us on the other road."

"Men," commanded Paxton, in a low voice, "divide in files, one keeping under the trees at the right of the road, and the other under the trees to the left. If a shot is fired from beyond, halt where you are, throwing yourselves each on the ground behind the tree nearest. Don't fire until you receive the order."

Not one of the Bountyville boys thought of grinning. Each young soldier took this practice march as seriously as did his officers. Forward in two files the column stole, officers, noncoms, and privates all keeping an alert lookout forward.

Up the bank from the water's edge rode a horseman, entering the road just ahead of them. He looked at these approaching khaki-clad figures with amused contempt. It was Phil Barron, in his cadet gray uniform, on his own saddle horse.

"Lieutenant Houston said something might

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happen on the road," murmured Tom to himself. "I wonder if the Barron Cadets really are out to give us a sham attack?"

He put this question to Paxton.

"I don't believe it," replied the latter, shrugging his shoulders. "Phil wouldn't allow his Cadets to be mixed up in any game with us."

"It can't be a sham attack," Tom decided, an instant later. "If it were, not even Phil Barron would be fool enough to ride directly toward us alone, inviting capture."

For Phil, having sat on his horse glaring at them for a moment, was now coming forward at a canter. The Bountyville detachment, divided into two files, under the shade of the trees at either side of the road, left Phil a clear highway.

"Better run your men at the bridge, Lieutenant Paxton," Tom advised. "As soon as they are across, halt them and order them down flat until we see whether we are to be fired upon."

So it happened that, at the moment of passing the young horseman, the Bountyville detachment was nearing the bridge at a run, Paxton sheathing his sword.

Phil looked as if doubtful for a moment. Then, as he rode between the two jogging files, he called out gruffly:

"You'd better look out for that bridge!"

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No one paid any heed to him, thinking it merely a bit of surliness from young Barron. Tom and Paxton ran ahead of the files, reaching the bridge just an instant before them. Side by side Tom and Paxton raced out on to the bridge. There was nothing to warn them of danger, until—

Slide! Scr-r-rape! Plunge!

Tom Tallant caught wildly at nothing as the farther end of the board went down under him. The next crossbeam of the bridge structure was too far away to be clutched at. Tom and the loose board shot down into the swift stream together. His startled cry was echoed by Paxton who, almost at the same instant, had loosened another board with his weight and was shooting toward the water.

The board that Paxton had dislodged struck Tom glancingly on the head as he came up to the surface blowing the water from his mouth. The blow, though not a direct one, stunned him for the moment.

“Look out for the major lieutenant!” rang a warning voice from above. The file leaders had stopped just in the nick of time to save sharing in the disaster.

“What’s the matter? Can’t you swim?” cried Paxton. Then a throb of alarm seized him as he

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saw Tom sink. It was hard swimming in this swift stream, but Paxton managed to reach his brother officer, diving and bringing him up.

"In here, one or two of you!" shouted Paxton.

There were three splashes as that number of young soldiers went to the assistance of their officers.

All good swimmers, they bore their senseless young commander up now without difficulty.

"We'll get to the farther side with him," proposed Paxton. "That's on our way, anyway."

As the swimmers made across the stream, which was not wide, the members of the detachment up above took their way cautiously over the bridge, examining the planking with great care.

"It's a fearful shame to have a public bridge in such condition," grumbled Paxton, as the rescue party bore Tom, still unconscious, from the water, and the rest crowded about.

Then Paxton turned to examine the condition of his commander. At one side of Tallant's head was a slight lump that would soon be larger. The young soldiers went to work to revive their major according to the rules of "first aid for the injured."

"If we don't get him around soon," announced

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Paxton, "one of you will have to run after the column and get the hospital corps men here."

But Tom, under vigorous handling, soon opened his eyes. It took him a few moments to understand.

"I wonder if that was what Phil Barron meant when he called to us?" pondered Tallant aloud.

"He'd be mean enough to fix the bridge that way himself," flashed Lieutenant Paxton resentfully.

"Except that it would be too much like labor for him," Tom rejoined dryly.

"Well, how are you, anyway, major? Are you going to be able to go on, or shall we send for your horse and have you taken to one of the wagons?"

"Why, of course I'm going to go on," Tom responded. "Help me to my feet, please, and I'll show you."

"Go easy, anyway, at first," urged Paxton.

"And keep the main column waiting at the junction of the roads!" Tom retorted. "They'll be sure something has happened. Lieutenant-Colonel Houston won't allow the line to go farther into the enemy's country until we're accounted for."

"What's the matter? Anyone hurt on that bridge?" hailed a voice from up the slope, as a

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lumber wagon came in sight with three workmen riding on the load.

"It's lucky there aren't some of us killed," rasped Paxton. "Did you men leave the bridge in that shape?"

"We're repairing," called one of the men, the wagon now nearer. "But we left a 'danger' sign on the bridge before we went away."

Tom and his lieutenant glanced at each other. Could Phil Barron have removed that sign?

"I hardly think that was Phil's doing," Tallant said in answer to his subordinate's look. "In the first place, I don't believe Phil knew we were coming this way until he rode up into the highway and saw us. In the second place, to do him full justice, he warned us to be careful about the bridge."

"But we didn't understand the way he put it," objected Paxton.

"Perhaps that was our fault as much as Phil's. I'm inclined to think that most likely these workmen forgot to put up a sign, but now claim they did through fear that we'd collect damages from the town."

"Are you able to go forward now?" asked Paxton.

"Yes; and we must make good time, too. I'm not really dizzy now, though I was for a time.

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If I find that I have to drop behind, you take the detachment on at good speed, anyway. Speed will help to dry some of the clothes that are wet."

Tom managed to keep up with the gait of the detachment, though he really felt anything but well, and that lump on his head pained him a good deal.

In time they came to the junction of the roads. Captain Henderson, with commendable caution, had halted some distance down the road, with his men well disposed for resisting a sudden attack. The advance guard was halted and deployed just ahead of the junction of the roads.

Tom made his report to the army officer with commendable military precision.

"You may wait and ride on one of the wagons, major, if you wish," suggested the army officer.

"Thank you, sir. I feel that I can ride my horse."

The marching column then proceeded, Major Tallant, despite the soreness in his head, taking pains to conduct the advance with the same amount of military caution that had been observed throughout the day.

In the middle of the afternoon they came in sight of the chosen camp site. The advance guard, reaching the top of the slope first, seemed

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to be in a good deal of a flurry. Tom studied the advance curiously through his field glasses; yet, as no signals came back, he did not order a halt.

Then, as the main column reached the top of the little hill our hero saw what had caused the excitement. At the crest of the next little hill, something more than four hundred yards distant, was a military camp already pitched. Gray-uniformed boys moved about over there, while in front of the largest tent waved from two flagpoles the pennants of the Barron Cadets.

"We're in the face of the enemy, sir," smiled Tom, turning to Lieutenant Houston. "May I ask if you knew that the Barron Cadets were to be over there?"

"I did not," Houston replied at once. "This, evidently, is a surprise sprung upon us all by the genius of young Phil Barron."

"That partly explains how Phil happened to be on the road in uniform," Tom remarked to some of the officers.

"It spells T-r-o-u-b-l-e ahead, anyway," uttered Dick Henderson, with a grimace. "Maybe we're going to have something like a state of real war on our hands."

Major Tom thereupon gave orders that resulted in drawing attention away from the other

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camp. The Bountyville boys were soon busily engaged in putting up their own tents which had just arrived with the baggage train. They were so employed until nearly dark, when, work done, they knocked off for supper.

Early in the evening Lieutenant Houston went down the road and then up toward the other camp. He was gone nearly an hour. When he returned he went straight to Officers' Row, where the young officers gathered about him.

"I don't believe you need expect much trouble with the 'enemy.' Mr. Barron has provided a camp for the Cadets, it is true, but he has taken the precaution to put them all, young Barron included, under the strict orders of Major Carson, a retired officer of the United States Army, who is over there in camp with the Cadets. I know Major Carson well. He is a fine old officer. He tells me that he will not permit any annoyance or rudeness on the part of his command toward this command."

"I wish I could share some of Houston's happy belief," whispered Dick Henderson to Tom a moment later. "I smell W-a-r!"

CHAPTER XVII

A SORRY KNIGHT

"THIS is really one of the most delightful things Mr. Page has ever done!"

So chattered Grace Ford to Margery Tallant as the two girls and Bessie left what had been a crowded stage and entered the Bountyville camp grounds.

Camp had been under way for four weeks. It had been a glorious time all the way through.

The ponies and the field cannon had been sent up, and cavalry and artillery drills and marches had been added to the groundwork of infantry camp life.

Not wholly nor even mainly a life of idle enjoyment had it been. Hiram Page's belief that every citizen should be fitted to bear arms had resulted in four weeks of the most exacting work for these young soldiers.

Yet there had been a wonderful abundance of sheer enjoyment sandwiched in with all the work. There were swimming matches held in the lake a

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half mile distant. Baseball and other sports had been indulged in, and there had been many saddle rides through the surrounding country. At night there had been sentry duty in turn. In fact, all through the encampment guard duty had been kept up day and night.

But now, to crown it all, in the estimation of most of the young men, "Public Day" had been arranged for. All those who choose to come from Westmont and the surrounding town and villages had been invited. From the railway station, nearly three quarters of a mile distant, stages conveyed Mr. Page's guests, as he chose to call them, to the camp grounds.

"Girl's Day" was the name many of the young soldiers smilingly gave this occasion. From Westmont most of the visitors were young ladies, with a suitable sprinkling of older persons. Nearly all of the boys in Westmont who were old enough, and who took an interest in matters military, belonged either to the battalion or to the Cadets.

Shortly after nine o'clock the visitors began to arrive. Bountyville boys took little groups of their friends in tow, and showed them all the sights of real military camp life.

Tom saw but little of his sister; he was too busy with actual duties. Dick Henderson, how-

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ever, placed himself at the disposal of Margery and her two friends.

Shortly before ten o'clock a bugle sounded the first call for artillery drill. There was a scampering of boys of B company for the tented stables on the far side of the camp, while the youngsters of A company took the visitors over to the enclosure reserved for them. Here a grand stand had been erected. As many as could find seats here. For the rest there were benches on the grass at either side, and all behind a fence of rope.

Then out came the artillery at a walk. Under Captain Dickson, with Lieutenant Houston at the side of the field, the artillery were put through the ordinary drills. Then followed artillery work at the trot, at the canter, and finally at the gallop.

It was lively work, indeed, when the field pieces were drawn over the plain at top speed, orders being given with saber signals when the racket was too great for the bugle to be heard.

Down the field, the entire length, dashed the flying artillery at the best speed of which the ponies were capable. A wheel, that was almost an about-face, was made with such suddenness and swing as nearly to take away the breath of some of the on-lookers. Then, at the other end of the field, the artillery halted with a suddenness that was well-nigh nerve-wracking. Work-

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ing like beavers, the young artillerymen unlimbered their pieces, while the ponies were being led back, and began firing.

Boom! boom! boom! The racket was deafening, yet inspiring.

Last of all the ponies were led up again. In tremendous haste the pieces were limbered, the ponies hitched, and an almost flying start made back to the stables.

Again the bugle's notes sounded, this time the first call for cavalry drill. A-company boys made their excuses, deserted the young ladies, and went jogging across the field. In a very short space of time they were out, mounted, armed with sabers, carbines, and revolvers, and going through all the mazes of troop drill.

Round after round of applause came from the grand stand and its neighborhood. It was wonderful to see schoolboys going through such work with so much swing, dash, and spirit. To inexperienced eyes the boys seemed like veterans.

As a matter of military courtesy an invitation had been sent from Lieutenant Houston to Major Carson for the Barron Cadets to attend to-day. But Phil had wholly disapproved of the idea, which settled the fate of the invitation.

That, however, did not prevent the Barron Cadets, from their own camp ground, watching all

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the work of the late forenoon as performed by their rivals. There were a few field glasses in the Cadet camp, and these were in almost constant use.

Phil, mounted on his own saddle horse, was watching the cavalry drill. He had ardently wanted ponies for his own company, but Mr. Barron, though a very wealthy man, had strongly objected to buying and stabling sixty-odd ponies to humor his son's whim.

"That's really the most showy thing those fellows do," Phil muttered crossly. "If my father would only let me equip the Cadets as a cavalry troop! But he won't, and it makes our crowd look like second-raters!"

Then, wondering who could be at the Bountyville gala day, and wondering especially if Grace were there, Phil left the Cadet camp grounds with a sudden determination to ride into the Bountyville grounds just long enough to have a look over the grand stand.

Bountyville's cavalry were charging now, amid applause and cheers from the on-lookers. Tom Tallant, though taking no part in the drill, was mounted and stationed not far from the grand stand.

Phil's horse, catching the spirit of the charge, broke into a canter. Young Barron, who prided

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himself on his horsemanship, was not averse to making a flying entry into the rival camp.

"Just to let folks see that there are others who can ride, too," he muttered, giving the spur slightly to his mount.

Just at that moment the cavalry made the quickest stop possible. Off from their horses the young cavalrymen threw themselves, knelt, and fired a rattling, blank volley from their carbines.

"Steady, you brute! Whoa!" roared Phil, as his excited mount gave a sudden spring forward. Then, just as another volley smote the air, Phil's mount broke into a quivering, frantic run.

One of Phil's feet was out of stirrup. Try as he would he could not fit his boot to that stirrup box again.

Straight across the field tore the maddened beast as a third volley ripped out. Then Lieutenant Houston, in the distance, realizing that Captain Barron's mount was running away with him, lifted his saber as a signal to the bugler to sound "cease firing."

"Whoa, you pesky brute!" quivered Phil, pulling desperately at the bridle.

There was no slackening the speed of the hard-mouthed animal.

"Whoa! whoa! Help!" roared young Barron huskily, while his face became decidedly white

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from fright. He had never had his horse act this way before.

All interest in the suddenly interrupted cavalry drill had now ceased. Grand-stand spectators stood up in their sudden excitement over the runaway.

A new cry behind his back reached young Barron.

"Tallant! Tallant!"

For Tom, at the first instant of realization that Phil's mount was running away with him, had put spurs to his own animal. He dashed across the plain at furious speed. Tom bent low over the animal's neck in order to offer less resistance to the wind.

Then began the exciting race. Exciting! It was more, for a life was at stake! A quarter of a mile farther on the plain that Phil was crossing at helpless speed ended in a low cliff. If his mount pitched over that cliff Captain Barron would be fortunate indeed to escape with his life.

"Do your best to rein in, Barron!" roared Tom, as he rode frantically to close up the gap between the two animals.

"Ain't I trying to!" Phil called back desperately, for he, too, knew of the cliff ahead.

Strange as it may seem, Phil had so completely lost his presence of mind that he did not

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think of giving a short, hard jerk at the bridle to send the frantic brute away from the cliff.

"Give a hard pull on your nigh rein, Barron!" Tom roared.

Phil did not seem to hear, or else not to understand. Straight on for the cliff he raced against his will.

"Pull up, or pull to the left!" Tallant again shouted. "You'll be killed if you don't!"

"Help! help! help!" screamed Captain Phil, in a frenzy of fright.

Tom, though half despairing of success, was still spurring forward. He realized that all now depended on himself, since Phil could not be made to do anything to save himself.

Foot by foot Tallant's mount lessened the distance. But now Phil, his cheeks blanched and his eyes bulging, felt certain that he must go over the cliff.

In the last hundred yards of that dash the head of Tom's pony reached the flanks of Phil Barron's horse, and began to pass.

"Pull up, now!" Tom shouted encouragingly. "Steady!"

Tom spurred alongside, crushing his leg somewhat between the flanks of the two speeding animals. He bent over, his right arm shooting out.

"Let go! I've got you, Phil!" Tom shouted,

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as he gripped his rival under the shoulders. He drew Phil out of saddle, across his own pummel, and pulled up his own snorting mount just in the nick of time, panting, quivering, almost at the brink of the cliff.

As for Phil's horse, it drew back too late from the danger. It plunged over with a cry of terror that was more jarring than a human shriek would have been.

Bringing his own mount around, Tom quickly let Phil slide to the ground and dismounted beside him.

"That was an awfully close squeak," smiled Tom nervously.

"Mighty!" admitted Phil, who was sitting on the ground.

Lieutenant Houston and Henderson now rode up.

"That was a splendidly brave thing to do, Major Tallant," spoke the army officer, as quietly as though he were praising some ordinary bit of good conduct.

"Why, it was the only thing that could be done," Tom laughed shortly.

"You're not hurt, Barron?" asked Lieutenant Houston, dismounting.

"Not a bit, but shaken up, I guess," Phil answered.

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Lieutenant Houston, handing his bridle to Dick Henderson, walked to the edge of the cliff, looking below.

"Your horse is on his side, not even trying to rise, Barron," Lieutenant Houston reported back. "He's hopelessly hurt beyond a doubt, poor beast. Shall I send Sergeant Heinz to shoot the brute and put it out of its misery?"

"I don't care a continental what becomes of the crazy beast!" growled young Barron resentfully. "The fool!"

Lieutenant Houston shot an indignant glance at young Barron, on whom it was wasted.

"Captain Henderson, will you ride back and send Sergeant Heinz, with a rifle, to do what he finds best after examining the animal down below?"

Saluting, Dick turned over Lieutenant Houston's horse to him, then mounted his own, riding off at a canter.

"Stand up and let me look you over," directed the army officer, bending to aid Phil in getting on to his feet. A brief examination convinced Lieutenant Houston that Phil's only injury was such as came from fright.

"You feel able to walk, don't you?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes," uttered Phil shortly.

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As Tom rode at one side of his rival, the army officer took his position on the other side.

"You can have my mount to go back to your own camp if you like," proposed Tom.

"Thanks," mumbled Barron. "I'm in no hurry to get on a horse's back again, I can tell you."

Over on the plain the cavalry maneuvers had come to an utter halt, though the troop still remained in saddle and in formation, Dick waiting for permission to order his command to stables. That was quickly given.

Cheering for Tom Tallant began a moment later. Phil flushed darkly, glancing sulkily at his rival. Then, as several of the young ladies and some of the older people hurried from the enclosure and came toward them, Grace and Bessie among the number, Phil suddenly remembered that something was due from him.

"Tom Tallant," he uttered, wheeling and looking half abashed at the other boy, "of course I thank you for what you did."

"Don't make too much of it," returned Tom lightly. "It wasn't much to do anyway, and I had a horse under me that I could trust. I'm mighty glad, though, Captain Barron, that I was able to reach you in time."

"It was quickly and finely done," Phil admitted.

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ted, flushing. Then the flush gave way to some pallor as he turned again and held out his hand hesitatingly.

"I thank you again, Tallant," Phil repeated, with what was bravery for him.

Tom Tallant's own hand came out promptly and gripped the other boy's clammy hand.

"We won't say any more about it, Phil," he proposed. "All's well that ends well, you know."

A dozen people of all ages came pressing around Tom, reaching for his hand and uttering words of praise or congratulation.

"Friends, don't make any fuss about it, please," Tom protested, smiling. "The little thing that happened just now doesn't prove anything except the excellence of the West Point training in horsemanship that Lieutenant-Colonel Houston has given us all."

Phil was divided between a longing to get away and the desire to stay just long enough to make sure that he and Tom were at last on speaking terms.

"Perhaps you and your comrades would like to come over this afternoon and see our sham battle?" Tom proposed hospitably. "We'd be glad to have you all come."

"Thanks," muttered Phil. It came hard, even now, to speak with good grace to this popular

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young rival. "We will, with Major Carson's consent."

Tom smiled, for he knew how gladly Major Carson would agree to anything like peace between the two military organizations. A glance around from our hero sent the Bountyville boys quietly away.

"I am glad you have had such a lucky escape, Phil," observed Grace, moving nearer to him and smiling in a somewhat friendly way. "It must have been dreadfully exciting for a few moments."

Bessie spoke to him, too, as did some of the other girls with whom he was acquainted.

Just then the sound of a far-away shot came to their ears.

"Gracious!" cried Bessie. "What can that be?"

"That's the work of the fellow who was sent to shoot my horse, I guess," Phil replied.

Both girls noted his indifference over the fate of the animal. It caused Phil to drop again, a few notches, in their opinion of him.

Soon, as it happened, Phil found himself standing with none but Grace and Bessie near him.

"It was very thrilling, as viewed from the stand," remarked Grace. "Isn't Tom Tallant a splendid fellow, though?"

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"Of course," muttered Phil, finding himself beginning to hate his rival again, as soon as the latter's praises were sounded.

"But you looked just too funny for anything—" began Bessie, then quickly checked herself.

"When?" asked Phil, with a quick flush.

"Pardon me. I didn't mean to say that," cried Bessie contritely.

CHAPTER XVIII

“HUMPH! TIN SOLDIERS!”

As if by magic a number of men appeared on wagons that had been kept in the background until now. Long field tables were quickly set up. Then what seemed a veritable feast to the hungry sight-seers was spread on the tables as soon as cloths had been laid.

Camp stools also were placed in position, the young soldiers, returning from stable duty, aiding in the work immediately after wash-up in their tents.

It was as jolly a luncheon as could possibly be set. The younger people paired off for the feast to suit themselves. Phil, still lingering, allowed his gaze to wander to the tables. It looked jolly and sociable to young Barron, who had so long been on the outs with most of his townspeople.

“We shall be glad to have you stay and lunch with us, Captain Barron,” announced the army officer, coming up.

Phil hesitated. It would be rather jolly, now

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that he was on fairly decent terms with the "enemy," to sit at table between Grace and Bessie. But just at that instant Tom, Henderson, and Ruhlmann came up to claim Grace, Bessie, and Margery as partners at the outdoor feast.

Young Barron quivered angrily. Had he not known Grace Ford longer than any of these young fellows? And did not Grace belong in his own social class, rather than in the company of these sons of workmen? It was not to be thought of—remaining!

"I'm due at my own camp, I think," he replied rather stiffly.

"Oh, very good," replied Lieutenant Houston quietly. "An officer has always his duties to think of first, of course. But remember, Captain Barron, that we shall look forward pleasantly to seeing you and your company here as our guests this afternoon."

"Will all of the members of the battalion be engaged in the sham fight?" questioned Barron.

"All of them."

"Then I shall have a chance to talk with Grace, and make her understand how much more proper escort I am for her," was Phil's reflection. "Very good, sir," he answered aloud; "I have no doubt that Major Carson will be glad to have us accept."

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"Will you kindly convey my compliments to Major Carson, and beg him, from me, to come himself this afternoon? Also add, please, that if he will come mounted, he will have an opportunity to go over the field with me during the maneuvers."

"Very good, sir."

Just in the nick of time Phil remembered to salute the army officer as he turned to leave. Lieutenant Houston returned the salute courteously, though there was a queer twinkle in his eyes as Barron turned and went away.

Just before two o'clock the Barron Cadets, without arms, came into the Bountyville grounds, in loose column of twos, at route step, their officers leading the way. Major Carson, in saddle, immediately rode over to where his junior in the service sat mounted.

Though there was room on the grand stand for but few of the cadets, Phil managed to make his way to where Grace, Bessie, and Margery sat. The first two squeezed out space enough between them to make a seat for the young captain in gray.

"I am glad you all came, Phil," said Grace, in a low voice, as she looked into his face.

"Humph!" young Barron grumbled to himself. "I wonder if she's beginning to take more

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notice of me just because I shook hands with Tallant! Oh, well, if that's the case, I'll shake hands with him again some time. It really seems worth while to be sitting here with the girls that a fellow knows best."

He would have grudged to admit, even to himself, that he really wanted to be somewhat friendly with Tom and the whole Bountyville outfit, including their friends. Only one who had been on the outside as long as Phil had could appreciate the fullness of this desire.

"I'll give Tallant a chance, anyway, to make up for bygones," was the way the young cadet captain put the case to himself. "We could have had a lot more fun this summer if we had been on fairly decent terms with these fellows."

"Look! There they go!" cried Grace, nudging his arm lightly.

The two companies had been split up for this afternoon. The battle was to consist of an attack by fifty men, led by Dick Henderson, on the camp as defended by thirty men under Tom. The attacking force carried two fieldpieces with them, nine cavalrymen, and the remainder acting as infantry. Tallant was to defend the camp with one gun crew and the rest as infantry.

It was a battle on a very tiny scale, yet the

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best that could be done, considering the numerical strength of the battalion.

To the tread of hoofs, the roll of wheels, and the clanking of sabers and other accouterments was added the steady whump-whump of marching infantry as the little column moved out.

"Don't they look splendid and warlike?" Grace whispered enthusiastically.

"Hm!" Phil answered noncommittally.

"It would be a lot more fun if all your Cadets were to be in this sham battle," murmured Bessie. "Then the battle would be carried on with greater numbers, and seem still more realistic."

"I suppose so," Phil replied.

"But I've heard," Bessie went on, "that your Cadets only drill and march and go through the manual of arms. You don't have as much of the soldier's real work as the Bountyville boys get, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know," Barron replied evasively. "We do a lot of work, even if we don't talk much about it."

Grace sent Bessie a warning look, which made that latter young lady remember that she must be careful to say nothing that would start bad feeling again between the two military organizations.

Henderson's column soon disappeared from view. At about the same time Tom disposed of

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his little command for the best defense of the camp from any point. The solitary fieldpiece was stationed where it could command the field in any direction.

Phil tried to talk about other topics, but Grace interrupted him with:

"Oh, not now, please! I'm watching very anxiously. I want to be sure to see the enemy when they first appear. I want to see just what they do on both sides."

"You have never seen a sham battle, have you?" Phil inquired.

"No," Grace admitted.

"I thought not. A sham battle is carried out on just the same plan as a real battle. In war, nowadays, soldiers don't often see their enemies—at least, not until the battle is over, anyway. Modern rifles are such exact weapons that soldiers have to keep themselves concealed all they can. Bet you a box of chocolates, Grace, that you don't see a single one of the attacking party until after you hear the opening shots."

"Do you think I am going to wager with a soldier on the odds of his own professional game?" cried Grace gayly.

That made young Barron feel decidedly better. Grace, if she could only keep the irrepressible, mischievous Bessie fairly quiet for one

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afternoon, was likely to do much to render abiding the peace between the battalion and the cadets.

So long were the spectators obliged to wait that the whole thing was becoming monotonous, when there suddenly came a sharp, irregular crackling of rifles in the distance.

"There they are! It has begun!" cried several of the spectators, rising.

"Where are the attacking soldiers?"

"Over there hidden in the pine woods."

"I don't believe it. They're back of that knoll of ground."

Many and varied were the opinions that flew about. Those present who had never seen war began to get an idea of what a mysterious game it is in these days, instead of being an affair of much cheering and gallant charges, with the contesting forces in plain sight of each other.

The camp's defenders were lying flat, with their rifles at ready, while Ruhlmann, Tom's only officer, stood up by the solitary fieldpiece. Tom was sweeping the country to the west with his field glasses, trying to locate the exact position of the enemy. If he made a wrong guess it would count against him in the judges' decision. At last, he was sure that he had placed the enemy in a distant belt of young hemlocks. The rifles of the camp's infantry defenders began to talk.

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"See if you can't shell the enemy loose from that position, lieutenant," Tom called to his artillery officer.

Boom! The fieldpiece was talking now, and adding greatly to the infantry din, for Ruhlmann served and fired fast.

"Where do you think the attacking party are, Phil?" Grace asked.

"Tallant thinks they're over in that hemlock belt," Phil replied cautiously.

"It seems queer to think of war without any smoke," Grace admitted.

"The use of smokeless powder has brought that about, Grace. Nowadays, fighting is a good deal like going into a dark room where another man is shooting at you. You know he's there, and he may be able to see you and shoot straight at you, but you have to guess where he is."

"Ugh!" shivered Grace, making a pretty little mouth. "I shouldn't think men would care much about that kind of work."

"It takes *men* to do it, of course," Bessie broke in.

Phil, who was on the point of making some disagreeable remark about real soldiers, closed his mouth with a snap.

Suddenly the distant firing ceased. Then it broke out at another point. The first brief at-

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tack had been intended only to draw the attention of the camp's defenders. Now, the enemy's firing became much louder. In a few moments Tallant was sure he had located the real point of operations of the enemy. Ruhlmann turned the artillery on the new point. After two minutes of brisk firing, Henderson's two fieldpieces joined in the din, showing that Tom had truly found the enemy, and that his artillery was making the enemy's position as "warm" as could be desired.

"I'm glad they're using only blank ammunition," quivered Grace excitedly.

"So are the Bountyville boys, you bet!" flashed Phil. "If it was real ammunition you'd see them crawling as fast as they could go."

"Oh, I don't know about that," pouted Grace. "There have been boys in every one of our wars, and I don't believe they ever established the record for running away."

"If it were real ammunition being used now, Phil, in which direction would *you* run?" teased Bessie.

Phil checked an impulse to give a snappy answer, grinning instead as he answered:

"In that case, Bessie, I think it would be safer to stay right here and hoist a Red Cross flag over the grand stand."

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Grace laughed merrily.

"Do all men who get drafted and don't want to fight carry Red Cross flags?" asked Bessie demurely, before Grace's signal flash of the eyes reached her.

"I don't know," young Barron answered more glumly. "I've never been in real war, you see."

"It would have been a great joke," Grace suggested laughingly, "if we had only thought to bring a Red Cross flag to hoist in this stand."

That restored good feeling for the time being. But Phil presently discovered, when he tried to address the girls, that they answered him in very few words, or else not at all. They were greatly interested in the sham battle, and said so.

In the course of time Dick got closer with his attacking force, until his artillery could be made out at the top of a low knoll, though the cavalry made a brief demonstration at another point. Tom threw half of his fighting force farther out toward the enemy. Then began some rapid intrenching by the balance of the camp's defenders. That made a pretty bit of exhibition work. Provided with trenching tools, and crouching close to the ground with their rifles at hand, the intrenchers dug a trench to the depth of a foot and a half, throwing up the dirt in an embankment on the side toward the enemy. Two trenches in all were

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dug, protecting the camp from differing angles. Then, a few at a time, Tom called in his outpost forces, until all were lying in the trenches, firing fast over the parapets.

Presently Dick's forces, except the now invisible cavalry, rose with a cheer over the distant crest, charging a few yards nearer, then throwing themselves flat and firing fast. Several more advances they made by rushes. Then it was seen that the attacking force was intrenching, too, despite Ruhlmann's busy service of the artillery against them.

There was a lull in the sham battle. The short silence was followed by more heavy volleys from Dick's command and a heavy service from his artillery. The camp defenders replied in kind. After that, just as the firing died down, Dick's little force leaped over the trenches, cheering, and tried to charge the camp. Tom's infantry and artillery barked themselves hoarse with the return fire. Lieutenant Houston rode out waving the charging lines back, a sign that they were tactically repulsed.

After that came more brisk firing. It was still going on when Major Carson, consulting his watch, held up his hand. Sergeant Heinz hoisted a black flag in plain sight of both forces—a signal that night had fallen over the field. Now, Lieu-

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tenant Houston came riding toward the grand stand.

"Nightfall brings with it a drawn battle," he announced. "Neither side wins."

Then, while the late assailants came leisurely in, and all the Bountyville boys disappeared briefly from view, the spectators found time for much talk and comment. Twenty minutes later, however, the battalion, now in full dress uniform, fell in for dress parade. For the first time in the day a military band appeared, marching across the field to the flagstaff.

The grand old ceremony of honor to the Stars and Stripes was carried out with the devoutness of a religious ceremony, yet with all the sprightliness and spirit of the military service. Boom! went the sunset gun. Sergeant Heinz began to lower the flag; the band played "The Star-spangled Banner."

Phil, owing to the great interest displayed by his companions in what was going on, had fallen into a strain of glumness. He sat with his head bent, his chin in his hands.

"Aren't you going to rise as everyone else has done?" Grace whispered softly down to him.

Phil started, springing quickly to his feet with a guilty start and something of a flush of anger.

"Don't you take your cap off while the band

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plays that air, as all the other men have done?" Bessie whispered reprovingly. "See, Major Carson is looking straight at you, and he seems very much annoyed."

The flush in young Barron's face changed almost to purple. He brought himself very stiffly to "attention," doffing his fatigue cap and holding it over his heart.

A moment or two later Major Carson, sitting very stiffly in saddle, and with his eye on Phil, rode up, calling:

"Bugler, sound the assembly for the Barron Cadets!"

That took Phil away, after a hasty, half churlish good-by to the girls. He formed his command in company front at a whispered word from Major Carson. A little way off stood the Bountyville boys, still in formation.

"Battalion, attention!" rang Tom Tallant's voice. "Present arms!"

Phil's company, being without arms, raised their hands in salute to their cap visors, while Major Carson, on behalf of the Cadets, thanked Lieutenant Houston for the pleasure of the afternoon. Then, at a signal from the old major, Phil broke his company into column of fours while the band played them off the field.

"All very fine!" Phil Barron muttered to

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himself, as he led his company back to its own camp. "But everything that happens seems intended to rub the notion into me that I'm a sort of social half-breed. I can't and won't stand this much longer. Tom Tallant? Pooh! He's always perfect!"

CHAPTER XIX

LOCAL WAR CLOUDS ARISE

As Lieutenant Houston, of the Regular Army, and Major Tallant, of the Bountyville Battalion, alighted from the train at Westmont, and walked through the village at an easy infantry gait, they looked the fine pair of soldiers that they were.

Both noticed something unusual in the general air of the village, and in the looks of the people they passed, but paid little heed. They were headed for the works owned and operated by Hiram Page. In the summer camp up in the hills they had gone as far as Mr. Page's orders carried them. It was more than time for new orders; in fact, orders were overdue.

"It isn't like Mr. Page to be anything but prompt in all things," ventured Tom, as they neared the works.

"We shall find that Mr. Page has a most excellent reason for his delay in sending orders," replied Lieutenant Houston.

"Why, that's a queer look about the works,"

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suddenly exclaimed Tom. "See, there are a lot of men out in the yard, and any number more men are standing at the windows looking out."

"That is odd," agreed Mr. Houston. "And, by the way, Tallant, judging by the sound, there isn't anything like full power on in the works."

"What can it all mean?"

Their course, however, did not take them past the idle workmen gathered in the yard. There was no one on the way of the new arrivals, which lay up the graveled road from the office gateway to the doors of the office building. Tom, for some unknown reason, felt a queer bumping of his heart against his ribs as he turned the knob of the outer door, then stepped aside for Lieutenant Houston to enter first.

The lieutenant led the way to the door of Mr. Page's office, opened it, looked in, and then called, as though in some doubt:

"May we come in, sir?"

"Come right in, Lieutenant Houston!" called the voice of Hiram Page.

The army officer stepped hardly more than inside the door. Tom entered and stood a little nearer the door, which he closed.

Hiram Page was walking the floor near his desk by one of the big windows. Several of the foremen were present, while also in the group

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were Sheriff Hayes and one of his deputies. The presence of the officers of the law gave a grawsome look to the picture—at least in Tom Tallant's eyes.

"Come right over, both of you," smiled Mr. Page. There was a troubled look in his eyes, despite the cheery ring of his voice, as he added:

"Though I don't know that either of you gentlemen can help us out much in our perplexity."

Lieutenant Houston and Tom moved closer, neither asking any questions.

"Do you notice anything unusual about the works?" asked Mr. Page, after a moment of silence, during which the sheriff and his deputy fidgeted somewhat.

"There seems to be a hush here, and a good many of your workmen appear to be idle, sir."

"The works will close down to-morrow, I fear," Mr. Page answered sadly.

Both his hearers started. Tom wondered if the presence of the sheriff and his man could mean that Mr. Page was in any financial trouble. That seemed altogether absurd, since Mr. Page was reputed to have much more wealth than he needed for carrying on his business.

"I may as well explain it all," Hiram Page continued. "The only thing that will compel the

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closing of the works, if that step is made necessary, will be the lack of steel to work upon."

"Are your shipments delayed, sir?" queried Lieutenant Houston.

"Oh, no; much to the contrary. Over at Westport, which you know is but five miles away, there are two schooners, each loaded with material for these works."

"Oh, then, the delay here will not be a long one, sir," Lieutenant Houston answered more cheerfully.

"I don't know," sighed Mr. Page. "No one knows—not even the sheriff."

Lieutenant Houston stared at the old man. It was past either hearer to understand what part the sheriff played in the unloading and carting of the cargoes of two schooners. But Hiram Page went on to explain:

"Nowadays, all the stevedore work at Westport is done by a crowd of Huns and Slavs. They number some three hundred men, hardly a dozen of whom speak any English. Some agitators among their number have formed a sort of union, and they have struck for absurdly high wages. Until the wages are granted them, they swear no cargoes shall be unloaded at Westport."

"But surely, sir, you can have no dispute with labor unions!" cried Lieutenant Houston in

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amazement. "Why, all the union labor men that I have ever met in this part of the country speak of you in the highest——"

"I can have no trouble with American labor unions," Hiram Page replied, with a smile that had something wistful in it. "In fact, the officers of the labor unions hereabouts have spent much of their time, yesterday and to-day, in trying to persuade these foreigners to listen to reason. The Huns and Slavs at Westport don't belong to any American union, but to some organization wholly their own that they have recruited within the last few days. It is in vain that I have reasoned with their leaders; equally in vain that recognized labor leaders in this part of the State have urged upon them that I am the last man upon whom a labor union should visit any hardship. As one of the directors in the corporation that controls the docking facilities at Westport, I must guarantee these foreigners that their wage demand will be met hereafter. I have gone so far as to agree to pay them their own wage demands for the unloading of my materials, but that will not do. I cannot raise their wages permanently on my own responsibility, and most of the other directors are away on their summer vacations."

"Do these men offer violence, Mr. Page?"

"That is the worst part of it. They do. We

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believe that most of those Westport strikers are carrying firearms. They threaten to mob-rule if we attempt to send a force of peace officers to Westport. My workmen would go over in a body, backed by the sheriff's officers, if I would let them, and would do the unloading themselves. My workmen have also volunteered to be sworn in as deputies, and to drive away the strikers from the docks. That, however, would mean nothing more nor less than bringing on a conflict in which scores would be killed or wounded on both sides. Naturally, I cannot bear the thought of all that slaughter."

Our hero had been listening with shining eyes, drawing gradually nearer to his aged friend's desk.

"I believe you have something to say, Tallant, and that you are finding it hard to keep it back," suggested Mr. Page. "If I am correct, let us hear what you have to say."

"I was going to suggest, sir," began Tom eagerly, "that what these foreigners need is to realize the strong arm of the law. They are not afraid of deputies, perhaps, but how would it be if they found themselves face to face with the bayonets and the loaded military rifles of a company of soldiers?"

"We have thought of that," Mr. Page an-

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swered. "Two hours ago Sheriff Hayes telegraphed the governor on that very subject. Unfortunately, however, the only militia company in this part of the State is away with the regiment to which it belongs, on a practice march through the mountains at the farther end of the State. There would be little likelihood of being able to get that company here until the morning after to-morrow. Now, what troubles us to-day is that the Westport stevedores threaten to burn my schooners by to-night if their demands are not met."

"But you have a battalion of your own soldiers, Mr. Page!" Tom exclaimed boldly, eagerly. "Why not use your own troops, sir?"

"What! Send you youngsters against a furious mob!" demanded Hiram Page, as if aghast at the idea. "No, no; we must find some better idea than that."

"I know our fellows well, sir," Tom went on insistently. "We're not tin soldiers, though we're often called that. Mr. Page, I don't want to seem forward, but we've got guns, bayonets, and military discipline. If there ever can be a time when we ought to stand by you, sir, this is the time!"

"And if some of you young men were badly hurt, or even killed"—Mr. Page shuddered—"what could I say when your fathers faced me?"

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"I think you would be able to retort, sir, that their sons went with their fathers' permission, and that the fathers even insisted upon your using the battalion that you created!"

Tom's answer was given with spirit. He was carried away with his own idea. Even apart from the duty that he felt he owed this grand old man, Tallant was burning with ardor for the soldier's work along with the soldier's uniform and accouterments.

"The fathers of four of our fellows are here, right now, sir," Tom went on coaxingly. "Ask them now, sir, what they say to the idea of their sons going out as soldiers—in fact, in the service of the man who made them soldiers."

Hiram Page sent an almost startled glance at his foremen.

"My boy can go on any kind of business of yours, Mr. Page," spoke one of the foremen quickly. "He'll have to. I won't own him if he doesn't."

The other fathers expressed themselves with equal emphasis.

"And every father in the works will answer the same way, sir!" cried Tallant vehemently. "Now, sir, will you let us help you?"

"I fancy the sheriff will dispose of that question by saying that minors couldn't serve the

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State. Besides, you do not belong to the organized militia."

"I don't know the legal standing of the case," Sheriff Hayes replied, well aware that the gaze of Tallant's blazing eyes was fixed upon him. "Only the governor could decide that question. But minors often serve in the regular State militia."

"Mr. Page, will you allow the sheriff to telegraph the governor, asking that official's permission to use us as a military company in protecting your vessels and the right of your employers to unload your cargoes of stock?"

Mr. Page undoubtedly would have refused flatly had not his foremen now began to urge the plan as eagerly as did Tom Tallant himself.

"But there are many *very* young boys in the battalion," argued Mr. Page.

"Let me suggest, sir, that you agree to use all of the fellows who are sixteen years of age and over, and provided that they secure written consent from their parents," pressed our hero.

"What do you think of the idea, sheriff?" asked Mr. Page dubiously.

"Your cadets, Mr. Page, would doubtless make a good impression on those Huns and Slavs, if the young men can make a good bayonet charge and press it home without wavering."

"We'll do that, Mr. Sheriff," Tom agreed. "If

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you take us over to Westport, you needn't fear to be ashamed of us."

Again the foremen pressed upon Old Man Bounteous their approval of the idea. Indeed, with them, as with our hero, it seemed a matter of bounden duty to a benefactor.

"Well, sheriff, if you think best, you can telegraph the governor for his idea on the subject," consented Hiram Page, in a rather weak voice. He sank into the seat by his desk, and all were quiet while the sheriff wrote his telegram. When it was done he handed it to the deputy, who hurried from the building. After the message had gone, there was nothing to do but wait for the reply from the State's chief executive. To relieve the strain, all present chatted about other matters. Hiram Page made a pretense of going through papers on his desk.

Then the deputy came back at the end of an hour. There was tense silence as Sheriff Hayes tore open the envelope. He read aloud:

"*HAYES, Sheriff, Westmont.*

"I authorize you to use your own judgment fully in preserving the peace in your county."

"*ANDERSON, Governor.*"

"Then you'll take us, sir?" questioned Tom.

"I'll make the trial," Hayes replied huskily.

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"We've got to do something, and promptly, or those furious foreigners will do even more than they threaten. Yet if our experiment fails, it would have been better not to have tried it."

Tom turned to Lieutenant Houston, a question on his lips, but the army officer interrupted him gravely:

"I can take no part in this, except on orders from the War Department or my Department commander. Major Tallant, you will look to the sheriff now as your superior officer."

Mr. Hayes took Tom apart. Five minutes later the deputy left to send this message over the wires:

"**HENDERSON, Captain, In Camp near Dalton.**

"Report immediately here, with Lieutenants Ruhlmann and Potter, and all noncommissioned officers and privates of sixteen years and over. Come by next train, armed as infantry, and with all field equipment, including sufficient tents. Mr. Page authorizes all necessary expense."

"**TALLANT, Major commanding.**"

Mr. Page broke the silence by stepping over to our hero and laying a hand on his shoulder, as he said hoarsely:

"Tallant, I thank you. I hope this turns out all right." Then to the army officer: "Lieutenant

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Houston, will you take the next train back and look after those who remain in camp?"

"Yes, sir."

The officer saluted as if replying to a superior in the service.

At a little after three o'clock that same afternoon an incoming train was degorged of one captain, two lieutenants, and fifty-five "enlisted men," all strangely excited and ready to cheer, though what about they hadn't the least idea. But Tom met them at the depot and set them scurrying.

By four o'clock that afternoon every last one of the little command had secured written consent from a parent, and this provisional company of junior militia was ready for service of any kind—anywhere on earth!

In the meantime their tents and other field necessities had been loaded on wagons which had started slowly on ahead. Sheriff Hayes and his single deputy were seated in a buggy just outside the armory. The young Bountyville infantrymen, now on active service, hustled about in their last preparations. An enthusiastic crowd had gathered down at the sidewalk, and there was occasional cheering.

Then the assembly blew. The provisional company fell in as if by magic. There was a quick

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roll call, a hasty but smart dressing of the line, a counting of fours, and then, at a signal from Tom, Captain Dick Henderson's voice boomed out with the command:

“Fours right, right forward—*March!*”

There was silence as the khaki-clad line came down the road in splendid formation and with martial tread. Then, as the head of the company wheeled at the street, the cheering broke loose.

A little way up the street Hiram Page leaned forward from the window of a closed carriage and waved his hand at them earnestly. He could not speak, but he watched the soldiers he had created going away for their first taste of real service.

The last that he or the crowd heard was Dick Henderson's voice:

“Route step! March!”

Then the Bountyville boys trudged out of sight.

CHAPTER XX

AT THE POINT OF THE BAYONET

“HALT here, if you please, major.”

Sheriff Hayes, as his deputy pulled in his horse, rose and called back that request. At the command the Bountyville boys halted just on the crest of a low hill that looked down into Westport. The road on which the company stood ran down through the little town as its main street, and straight out to the docks.

At a signal from the sheriff, Tom and Dick went forward for further instructions.

“You see them, below there?” said the sheriff, with a wave of his hand toward the town. “You see those little groups of men standing at different points along the street? The rest of them are in the saloons, ready to rush out at the first signal. I am almost certain that to march you down there now would be to start a fight in which a few lives would be lost. So I am going to leave you here, where those fellows below can look up and see the military ready. In the first place,

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I'm going down there with my deputy and see what the effect of law and order alone will be when backed up by a visible military force. Don't move forward unless you hear my whistle. If you hear any shots, though, come on the double quick. If anything happens to the deputy and myself, then clear the streets and take military possession of the town."

Tom bowed his understanding of the orders. Both young officers, saluting the sheriff, returned to their command.

During the five-mile march the young soldiers had overtaken the wagons carrying their field baggage. These wagons were now in line just behind the company, guarded by an escort of eight young soldiers under command of Lieutenant Potter.

Sheriff Hayes, in the meantime, drove leisurely on into the village.

"See those fellows come pouring out into the street," muttered Captain Dick, fumbling for the hundredth time with the loaded revolver in the holster at his belt.

"They must be laughing at the sheriff," smiled Tom. "Or else they must have a great idea of his courage in entering the town, guarded only by one deputy."

"Oh, the sheriff is safe enough, I guess," put

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in Ruhlmann, "as long as he doesn't make any move to enforce law and order."

Sheriff Hayes had stopped now, surrounded by a big group of strikers, which was constantly growing by new additions.

"There he is pointing to us," announced Tom. "I guess the crowd has seen us for the first time, or else it has just dawned that we are soldiers."

Down in the village an angry roar went up. Plainly the mob had become infuriated. The leaders, then, were not disposed to be cowed by the threat of using bayonets. As that roar grew in volume and in anger, the young Bountyville soldiers looked queerly at each other. A few faces grew more or less pallid, though pallor is by no means a reliable sign of cowardice.

"Here comes the sheriff back!" called Dick.

"Yes; silence in the ranks!" commanded Major Tom.

He stood watching the exciting sight down in the street below.

Sheriff Hayes was trying to drive back through the crowd. Those nearest the buggy seemed bent on hemming him in. Then a cobble-stone passed close to the sheriff's head.

"Whew!" gasped Dick. "I don't want to stand here long looking at that sort of thing!"

"We have our signal to wait for," Tom an-

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swered calmly as to voice, though he, too, was quivering under the surface.

Now, as the deputy lashed the horse, the blocking crowd broke, letting buggy and officers through. A shower of missiles followed, and Sheriff Hayes was seen to bend forward. The deputy, driving with one hand, threw the other arm about his superior.

"They've hurt the sheriff!" cried Ruhlmann angrily.

In the ranks the excitement was intense. A restlessness that differed from fear had seized most of the young soldiers. Only Tom seemed almost as rigid as stone.

Trill-ll-ll! came the sound from below.

"There's the whistle!" quivered Dick, in an undertone.

"Move your company forward, captain, at the route step!"

It was a relief to be in motion again, going nearer to the "enemy." The khaki-covered legs of the young soldiers moved, now, in a sturdy trudging. Eyes gleamed, though there was little other sign of excitement. The peace officers' buggy having gotten away from the mob, which now blocked the street in the center of the little town, was halted and turned about, so that the sheriff, more than three hundred yards from the

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mob, was again facing them. Tom ran on ahead to receive the sheriff's orders.

"You'll have to clear the street, major. Put your bayonets on and go straight through the town down to the docks. Caution your men not to allow themselves to be stopped or blocked. Don't fire, though, unless I give the order. I shall be right with you."

"Halt your company, captain," called Tom. Sheriff Hayes looked a bit surprised at that, but then the peace officer had never been a military man.

"When we get close to the town," Tom explained, in a low voice, which nevertheless carried down the line, "we'll run into platoon front. The first platoon must spread across the street. If we're blocked, the second platoon, at the order, will fill the intervals. Present a solid wall of steel to the mob. Don't allow yourselves to be halted, even for an instant. Whatever you do, don't let there be a break in the line anywhere! Use your bayonets if you have to—and use them for business!—but don't use them savagely or viciously. Now, let your men fix bayonets, captain. Remember that no one is to fire without the order."

Bayonets fixed, the line went forward again. Route step was abandoned now. The young soldiers marched as though on parade, officers and

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file-closers keeping an alert eye over the alignment.

No needless backdown was to be looked for from the mob ahead! The strikers, as if to test the mettle of the young soldiers, came moving up the street to meet them. Tom nodded the signal, and Dick gave the order that sent some fifty youngsters running into two platoons.

Ah! Now it looked like business! By the time that the young soldiers were about two hundred yards from the head of the mob some one down in the crowd fired a shot. Two others followed. None of the young soldiers, however, heard the whizz of a bullet. Jeers and angry taunts in a foreign tongue were hurled at the young soldiers. Then stones and other missiles began to fly.

Tom glanced at the sheriff, who nodded approval.

"Forward at the double quick, Captain Henderson!" called Tom, in a low voice. "Take the left of the platoon and hold it steady. I'll stay on the right."

That left Lieutenant Ruhlmann just behind the second platoon. Lieutenant Potter, with the wagon train, had not attempted to come forward, but was to await orders.

Sheriff Hayes and Deputy Delman, in their

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buggy, had now fallen behind the second platoon.

The mob had halted, glaring sullenly at the swiftly on-coming young soldiers.

"Get back!" roared a voice in broken English.
"We got plenty revolver and will use dem."

"If you do," went back Major Tom's shouted warning, "you'll know what a volley feels like!"

Seeing the young soldiers keep on coming in perfect alignment, some of those in the mob looked as if about to waver. Then an order was called out in a foreign tongue by some leader in the crowd. More than a dozen revolvers greeted the vision of the young soldiers.

"Steady!" called Tom, in a low voice. "Go right through them!"

The first row of gleaming bayonets was now so close that in an instant more the mob must either break or fight. But the Bountyville boys pressed steadily forward, as if they could see but one possible move on the part of these rioters—a break and a retreat.

Some in the mob had begun to move backward as the line of bayonets came close to the breasts of the foremost. But many of the more resolute of the rioters failed to budge.

"Now, steady! Right into them!" called Major Tallant.

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Some of the rioters had to feel the prick of steel before they believed that these youngsters meant to carry out their orders. Half a dozen of the angry men tried to seize bayonet or rifle, only to find themselves menaced by the steel of the next nearest soldier.

"Get back, you young fools!" roared a leader in the mob. "We don't want to kill boys like you, but—"

"Our orders are to clear the street! We're going to do it!" warned the young major. "Get back and there won't be any trouble! Second platoon close the intervals!"

Most of the rioters had already turned to run back a little way. At sight of that wall of steel points doubled, the rest retreated sullenly, though growling, and with their faces to the young soldiers. Then a cobblestone flew through the air, landing a few yards behind the military line.

"Don't send any more missiles, unless you want us to shoot!" warned Tom.

Though the mob had broken and yielded at first impact, that was no sign that they were to be so easily vanquished. Many voices now called through the mass of the rioters. The mob halted in its retreat, then sent men pressing forward from the rear.

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"Yah! Now get through us! Try it if you dare!"

The rioters presented a tightly packed front that extended across the street.

"You stick that steel in us 'gain, and ve shoot you down like young puppies!" defied a voice.

"Begin shooting any time you think best!" retorted Tom, his voice ringing clearly. "Our volley will be right on top of yours. All who don't want to get hurt get out of this street! Those who stay are going to get hurt."

The lines met again. But the Bountyville boys did not stop. They moved forward, prodding with steel where they had to. One big, hatless fellow, standing just in front of Tom, sprang forward, grasping at his sword and trying to wrench it away. But Tom, with the utmost promptitude, drew his revolver, striking the fellow over the head with the barrel. That rioter fell to the ground half stunned, and the military line passed over him. Deputy Delman leaped down from the buggy, handcuffed the man, jerked him to his feet, and led him along.

The mob had broken again. It had to, or fight cold steel. Though many of the rioters had revolvers drawn, they hesitated to use them as yet.

Nearly every Bountyville boy was white-faced

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now. Nearly every fellow's breath came and went in short puffs. But the line never wavered, for which reason the mob had to draw back.

Then a leader of the riot shouted in English, probably for the benefit of the young soldiers:

"Shoot them, since they must have it! Begin firing!"

"Halt!" commanded Major Tom. "Second platoon, take your interval to the rear. First platoon, kneel. Ready! Aim!"

At the word "ready" there was a rattling of breach bolts. The young soldiers' rifles were loaded, though with blank cartridges. Doubtless many in the mob suspected that only blank cartridges would be used, if any, yet no one of the rioters could be sure of that.

In strong contrast to the passion of the mob was the steady, disciplined columns of our hero's command. The contrast must have impressed even the excited rioters, for, though now several scores of revolvers were in sight, not one was aimed at the young soldiers.

Sheriff Hayes, in his buggy, and suffering from a blow on the head from a flying stone just before the arrival of the military, stood up watching the scene breathlessly. The peace officer did not attempt to give any order, however. All the effect gained would be lost by any inter-

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ference with young Major Tallant at this critical moment.

"Uncock your pieces! First platoon, rise! Second platoon, close the interval!" rang Tom Tallant's voice, almost monotonously. "At the double quick, forward, march!"

Again the line moved forward. The mob had grown sullen and silent, wondering. Were these boyish-looking young soldiers made of the stuff that could vanquish them?

Cooler counsels must have prevailed among the excited hundreds, for now, though the mob kept together, it fell back as readily as the young soldiers advanced. As for the Bountyville boys, having felt the power that their steady discipline gave them, they were no longer to be blocked by anything but death or severe injury.

Sheriff Hayes, standing in his buggy, driving at a walk, looked over the heads of the contending forces. He saw a score of rioters turn and run fast out upon the docks.

"Major Tallant!" he called quickly.

Tom darted back to see what was wanted.

"Some of the rascals have run out on the docks. I believe they're going to set fire to the schooners!"

"Shall I charge through that crowd, then, sir?"

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"Yes; reach the shipping at all costs. But don't fire without orders," Sheriff Hayes added, in a lower voice.

Tom darted back to his post on the right of the first platoon.

"Ready to charge! Charge bayonets!" he roared.

Unable to hold in any longer, the Bountyville boys sent up a hoarse cheer as they rushed forward at the charge.

There was clash and conflict in an instant. Yet the mob, taken unawares by this new move, broke and fled in either direction down the waterfront street. There were a few brushes, some of the rioters receiving pricks from the bayonets.

Major Tom, in the lead now, led the line straight down and out on the docks. Here a score of men were caught, either on the vessels or on the docks.

"Break ranks and arrest every fellow you find out here!" shouted the sheriff, driving out on the dock at a trot.

More than half the rioters escaped by leaping into the water and swimming for the shore lower down. Nine in all, however, of the rioting foreigners were rounded up and forced inside of a hollow, bayonet-lined square.

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Sheriff Hayes, springing down from his buggy, advanced to take Major Tom Tallant's hand.

"You've done splendidly, major! You cleared the street, and you've shown these fellows that you're real enough military for them."

"But I don't believe we're through with them, sir," Tom replied.

Lieutenant Ruhlmann, with the second platoon, had drawn his men up across the entrance to the docks. Just beyond surged the mob, at a respectful distance to be sure, but still unconvinced that it had been utterly whipped.

Sheriff Hayes, as he glanced at that muttering mob and then at the two-score and a half of young soldiers, had his misgivings that the real trouble had not yet started.

CHAPTER XXI

“FIRE AS SOON AS YOU LIKE, MAJOR!”

Now that the first flush of the excitement was over, Major Tom's thoughts turned in another direction.

“Potter and eight privates are back there on the hill with our wagon train,” he muttered to Captain Dick. “It won't be long before the mob remembers to turn its attention that way.”

“What's that?” asked Sheriff Hayes, coming closer.

Tom repeated what he had just told Henderson.

“It would be meat for those fellows to capture your wagon train, wouldn't it?” asked the peace officer glumly. “What can we do about it? Go through that mob again?”

“If we did it would be to abandon the docks,” Tom replied. “That also would be a military blunder.”

“Then what can you do?”

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“I would suggest, sheriff, that you use us to take possession of the street right through the village.”

“Then these Slavs and Huns would jump on you from all points,” protested the perplexed sheriff. “Your only strength, major, is when you’re all together, shoulder to shoulder, and each bayonet backed by another.”

“I think, sir, we’ll be quite strong enough to hold the length of the street if you order us to do it, and have me instruct the sentries to fire upon whomever starts violence.”

Sheriff Hayes looked worried. Yet the more he thought it over the plainer it became that this was the only course open if the baggage train were to be saved and brought down to the docks.

“How many of your men would you leave here at the docks, major?”

“The entire second platoon,” Tom replied. “One platoon will be enough for keeping up a sentry line along the street. Then, at the first shot, or other sign of trouble, the reserves could move forward, if needed. A volley would quickly sweep the street, Mr. Sheriff.”

“But firing a volley is just what I don’t want to do,” protested Mr. Hayes anxiously.

“It seems to me, sir, that the more ready we

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are to fire a volley, at provocation, the less need there will be to do it."

"Perhaps you are right there, major. No doubt you are."

"Then do you order me to throw out one platoon to patrol the street?"

"Yes; go ahead."

At Tom's order Henderson quickly had his first platoon in column of twos. Our hero gave the young soldiers their orders for sentry duty, after which, with the young major and the captain at their head, the platoon marched off the dock.

Ahead of them went the sheriff and his deputy, the latter having turned his prisoner over to the military guard.

"Now, you men clear out of the street, and keep out of the way," called Sheriff Hayes, in a loud voice. "If you try to start any more trouble this town will look like a battlefield! You men surely don't want that. Keep off the street! All who enter it will make themselves liable to arrest or being shot. Do you understand?"

Though nearly all of the rioters looked black and ugly, they fell away down the side streets, or else into the buildings.

"Don't allow anyone on the streets, remember, men!" Tom called, as Dick posted the

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sentries and defined the limits of their posts to them.

At such intervals were the sentries placed that two men were left at the point where the street left the little town behind. Captain Dick was down at about the middle of the line, where he could watch.

Near him three men came out of a building, as if to cross the street.

“Back there with you!” clicked Captain Dick, drawing his revolver.

The nearest sentry also brought his rifle to ready.

Growling, the three drew back into the building.

“We’ve got them cowed for a while,” murmured Dick Henderson to himself. “I only hope we can keep them so!”

Out at the end of the sentry line Major Tom signaled Lieutenant Potter to move forward. That was something young Potter was most eager to do. The wagon train moved slowly down the hill.

Sheriff Hayes and Deputy Delman waited with our hero until the wagon train arrived.

“Are you going to have these young men fix their bayonets?” asked the peace officer, meaning the members of the escort.

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"Not unless you order it, sir," Tom replied.
"I had a different plan."

"What is it?"

"There are four wagons. I wish to place two men on each. Up there, on top of the loads, they will be out of the reach of a first rush. They will be in a splendid position to shoot down into any gathering—a fact, sir, that I think the rioters will be quick to appreciate."

"Good enough, major. Do it your own way, then."

Tom thereupon disposed of the eight privates according to his own plan. Sheriff Hayes and his deputy walked at the head of the wagon train, Tallant and his lieutenant on either side at the rear of the last wagon. In this order the wagon train entered the town.

Though the sentries succeeded in keeping the streets clear at the first, anyway, many sullen faces were to be seen at the windows of the buildings on either side of the road.

"You men will do well to keep back out of trouble!" shouted Sheriff Hayes. "If you start a row, you will get so much more than you bargain for that you'll be sorry you didn't behave!"

It was ticklish work. At every step the young soldiers realized that they were over a volcano of hate. Yet the wagon train reached the docks un-

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molested, to the huge relief of all interested in the train's safety.

“Do you want to keep your line of sentries up the street, major?” asked Sheriff Hayes.

“That depends upon your plans, sir. We've cleared the street, and hold Mr. Page's two schooners in safety. Now, what is your next move to be, if I may ask?”

“It wouldn't be quite sensible to have wagons and men brought here to-night, and work at unloading through the night, would it?” suggested the county's peace officer.

“Not as the wagons loaded with steel have to pass up and down this street, sir. Rioters behind blinds and on rooftops could keep up a fearful fusillade of brickbats and other missiles, and I'm afraid there would be more trouble than we could handle.”

“Then, major, you'll have to hold the docks to-night, and to-morrow morning we'll try to run through laborers and wagons.”

“Then, as to keeping my sentries up the street, Mr. Hayes, I would suggest that it be done until nearly dark. Then we'll march them in and camp on that field across the street, so that we can hold both camp and docks. In the meantime, the rioters will get rather used to seeing soldiers holding the street. The longer those fellows have to think

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about the presence of soldiers who are ready to shoot, the more their ardor will cool, it seems to me."

"I believe with you, major," agreed the sheriff. "Well, then, until something happens, I'm going aboard one of the schooners and make myself comfortable. Why don't you?"

Ruhlmann had already appropriated a hold in one of the schooners for his nine prisoners. These had been forced to go down into the hold by way of a ladder, which had then been withdrawn. Now, one sentry, on deck above them, was sufficient to watch these sullen fellows.

Tom, Dick, the sheriff, and his deputy went aboard the other schooner. There was no crew aboard, captain and sailors having found it convenient to get ashore and away at the first outbreak of the trouble. Under an awning spread over the after deck the sheriff and his party made themselves comfortable on seats brought up from below.

"I never thought you youngsters would be so cool and steady," murmured Mr. Hayes, as he smoked.

"Thought we were just tin soldiers, eh?" smiled Tom.

"Yes, I'm afraid I did."

"And it didn't strike you, sir, that two or

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three years of military discipline were bound to have their effect on our fellows when the need came?"

"Military discipline must be a wonderful thing," observed the peace officer.

"It is," Tallant answered simply.

"Well, I'll believe in it after this," went on Mr. Hayes. "I'll admit that I was about scared to death over what might happen to you youngsters. I wouldn't have listened to the idea of bringing you Bountyville boys over here, only I'll admit that I was at my wits' end and didn't see any other way out of the mess. I know it was planned to burn these schooners to-night, if Mr. Page didn't give in before that."

"They may try to burn them yet," Tom smiled anxiously. "I'm afraid all the fight isn't yet out of that mob. By dark, I'm afraid they'll be furious."

"Oh, they'll try to put up some new kind of trouble yet, sure," nodded the sheriff, over his cigar. "Have you noticed, major, that there hasn't been a woman or a child on the streets since we've been in town? Nothing but men and nearly grown boys?"

"I saw that, Mr. Hayes."

"That means that the mob leaders expect shooting before they're through with the affair.

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Those who have families here in town are keeping them safe. There are a few good citizens in the town, too, but you'll notice that *they* also are keeping wisely out of the way."

Half an hour before dark Tom and Dick went up the street, attended by four privates. At the farther post they gathered in the sentry, then marched back, picking up each sentry in turn.

Two minutes after the military had withdrawn to the docks the street swarmed with rioters once more. Jeers and taunts, and threats both in foreign languages and in broken English, were hurled at the young soldiery.

"When are you going to pitch your camp, major?" inquired the sheriff.

"I don't want to until we have trouble with the mob and have it over with."

"Then you're sure there's going to be trouble?"

"I'm almost positive of it, Mr. Hayes. When the row comes, if come it must, it would be awkward to defend the camp and the docks, too. If we have a clash, though, and give the mob a severe lesson, after that they're likely to leave us alone, and then we can take care of a camp in addition to the docks."

By this time the lately withdrawn sentries were enjoying an evening meal forward on the

"FIRE AS SOON AS YOU LIKE, MAJOR!"

same schooner, a fire having been started in the cook's galley.

As long as daylight lasted our hero meant to remain just where he was, keeping his gaze all the time turned on the street beyond his guard line. He could see that groups on the street were rapidly growing in size, and that they were coming together. Every sign observable pointed to brewing trouble.

Every now and then, it was noted by the observers on the schooner's after deck, some of the rioters left the street to reenter the saloons.

"They're doing a lot of drinking, those fellows," muttered Tom.

"I'm noticing that," returned the sheriff grimly.

"It's too bad you couldn't have closed up all the saloons," cried Tom Tallant.

"Oh, I wanted to do that badly enough," replied Sheriff Hayes. "But we couldn't hold more than this street, at the most, and everyone of those rum holes has a back entrance. No; with our force we couldn't keep the saloons from doing business to-night."

"There are some coming out of the saloons and more going in," Tom continued. "See—many of them have brought bottles out with them.

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Oh, they're putting in Dutch courage for trouble-making!"

"I don't see how they're able to buy the stuff," muttered the sheriff. "Those men were nearly all hard up this morning. They must have gotten money from some source."

By the time that darkness came on the street, two hundred yards from the docks, was filled by a howling, taunting, defiant mob. Bountyville's young soldiers merely watched alertly.

"There! They're coming this way, now!" cried Tom, leaping over the schooner's rail to the dock. "Fall in, men—right behind the guard line! Two platoons!"

Sheriff Hayes and his deputy followed. The Bountyville company had fallen in swiftly without noise or excitement.

"Steady, now, men!" warned Major Tom's voice. "The time seems to have come for the real trouble. Keep your heads, and do nothing without orders. But obey any command the instant it is given!"

Captain Dick Henderson was over at the left of the line, with Ruhlmann just behind the first platoon, and Potter behind the second, where Sheriff Hayes and Deputy Delman also took their posts. Tom stationed himself just at the right of

"FIRE AS SOON AS YOU LIKE, MAJOR!"

his company, his sword drawn, but his revolver resting in its holster.

"Keep back, you crazy men!" roared the sheriff. "You don't want a taste of war, but you're heading for it!"

Derisive yells answered. The rioters, under the influence of liquor, were in a seriously reckless state now. Though they advanced slowly, they came steadily on. A few revolvers were even now to be seen in their ranks.

"Halt where you are!" roared the sheriff. "If they don't, major, give 'em a volley!"

From somewhere in the crowd a shot was fired —a shot that was meant for business.

Tom Tallant was seen to stagger slightly. Then he straightened, calling out laughingly:

"It was nothing but the unexpected shock."

He held up his left hand, the back of which had been grazed by the bullet and now was bleeding. With his eyes on the mob, Tom coolly wound a handkerchief loosely around the bleeding hand.

"First platoon, kneel!" he commanded.
"Ready! Aim!"

"Will you men get back there before there's bloodshed?" roared the sheriff.

Three or four shots from the rioters answered. Private Dawson. of the first platoon, fell. Ruhl-

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mann sprang to his side, lifting him and helping him from the ranks. Dawson had been struck in the fleshy part of his left thigh, on the inside.

"First platoon, fire!" came Major Tom's voice.

A crackling volley, almost in perfect unison, broke on the air. Some in the mob wavered, until they realized that it was only a blank volley fired over their heads.

Then frantic voices were heard urging the mob forward.

"Second platoon, ready! Aim! Fire!" the young major commanded.

The second volley was fired at a shoulder-high aim. The flashes of the rifles spat straight out at the foremost in the mob. That caused a halt and an instant's uncertainty.

The mob, after its first shock of surprise, rallied and hooted. These rioters, or most of them, now imagined that these boyish soldiers had come provided with nothing but blank cartridges. That was where the rioters made a huge mistake. The Bountyville boys had been supplied with but one round of blank ammunition. All the rest in their belts were regulation military cartridges.

Accompanying the hoots of the mob came a shower of stones, pieces of brick, and other missiles.

"FIRE AS SOON AS YOU LIKE, MAJOR!"

Private Lambert, hit in the knee, found it hard to stand, though he refused to fall out. Private Rafferty got a blow in the shoulder from a flying missile that made him ache for the beginning of the real fight.

"Rush 'em into the water!" roared another voice in the mob. "Get 'em going, and they won't be able to stop. Now, rush 'em!"

With a yell the mob advanced again.

"Give 'em the real thing, if you have to, major!" sounded the sheriff's heavy voice. "Fire as soon as you like, major!"

"Company, ready!" rang Major Tom's voice over the tumult of other voices. "With ball cartridge—load! Aim!"

There was an instant's clattering of breach bolts being shot back. Then, steady, though most of the young soldiers were white from the horror of the thing about to be done, the Bountyville boys slipped in ball cartridges and sighted at the foremost in the mob.

The *real* moment had come!

CHAPTER XXII

THE DISGUISED TROUBLE BREEDER

THERE is always something very convincing about the real thing. Perhaps the cool discipline with which the Bountyville boys loaded and aimed convinced the rioters that there was no longer to be any trifling.

At all events, the mob paused in its rush. There was a quick halt, frenzied moving in the crowd, and the calling of many voices, some of them ringing with alarm.

Not a few of the rioters darted through nearby doorways.

Young Major Tom Tallant, with the fateful word "fire!" hanging on his lips, hesitated.

"Will you get back in time, you crazy fellows?" bawled the sheriff's lusty voice.

There was a wild movement backward by the larger half of those who remained in the mob. Still the Bountyville boys held their aim, fingers on trigger. It was a tribute to their discipline that not a rifle was discharged wildly in that intense moment.

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"I guess you won't need to fire, major," called the sheriff's relieved voice.

"Withdraw your cartridges, men," spoke Tom, in a low voice, and without evident excitement. Then, with his eyes still on what was left of the mob, the young major stepped back to Sheriff Hayes's side.

"Do you think those are the ringleaders that are left, sir?" our hero asked.

"Undoubtedly some of them are ringleaders. Do you think your youngsters are cool enough to advance on the double quick and aid me in arresting some of those fellows?"

"Try us, sir," was Tom's laconic answer.

Sheriff Hayes stepped forward, explaining in a low voice what he wanted, then adding the single word:

"Now!"

At that signal the two platoons went forward at a run, with bayonets fixed. They were in that mob ere all of the rioters had warning enough to turn and flee.

A dozen were singled out and promptly arrested, the sheriff and his deputy holding their drawn revolvers to emphasize their commands, as did also Tallant and his three officers.

Still sullen, but with most of the fight scared out of them, the men marked as prisoners sub-

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mitted to arrest. Three or four started to resist, but were quickly subdued by bayonet thrusts or proddings with rifle butts.

As for Tom, he had his own captive marked as he ran. In the mob, from the time of its first forming, he had had his gaze much on one slim, dark-skinned young man in flannel shirt and worn trousers belted in at the waist.

"He's passing in and out among the strikers so much that he must be one of the trouble breeders," muttered Tallant, as he raced forward. So, at the moment that he reached the crowd, our hero, with his sword in scabbard but his revolver drawn, rushed up to that young man ere he could get away, and gripped him by the arm.

"You'll come along with us, for one," announced Tom dryly. "You've been making as much of this trouble as anyone."

The prisoner tried to twist away, raising his fist as if to strike. But Tom pressed the muzzle of his revolver against the trouble breeder's side.

"Don't try any tricks," advised Tom sternly. "Come along quietly or you'll wish you had!"

The dark-skinned young man opened his mouth as though to speak, then seemed to change his mind about that. He submitted to having his arm held, and Tom could feel the trembling in his prisoner's body.

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By this time all the prisoners wanted had been rounded up. Protected by their comrades, the Bountyville boys started back for the dock, forcing their prisoners before them.

As Sheriff Hayes turned to look his "catch" over, Tom's prisoner, whose arm he had released, made a gesture to attract his attention.

Then, placing a finger against his lips, the slim young man held out stealthily a little roll of greenbacks.

"Eh? What?" blurted Tom. "No; you can't bribe me to let you go. You're the sheriff's prisoner now, and I've nothing to do with letting you go, anyway."

"What's this?" demanded Mr. Hayes, wheeling. "A fellow offering you money, eh? Has he much of it, major?"

The dark young man had thrust the money back into a trousers' pocket.

"I don't know," Tallant answered. "I didn't see how much there was of it."

"Let's have a look at you, my man," suggested Sheriff Hayes, going up to Tom's captive. "I wonder if you're the fellow that provided drinking money for the rioters?"

"No, I'm not," came the growling, sulky answer.

Tom Tallant started, then took a swift step

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forward. Knocking off the prisoner's hat, Tallant snatched a black wig from his head, revealing natural hair that was a couple of shades lighter. An exclamation of dismay escaped the unwigged one.

"Phil Barron!" cried Tom, well-nigh aghast over his discovery. "Say, I thought so when I heard your voice."

"What? Can this be young Barron?" demanded Sheriff Hayes, who was even more thunderstruck.

"No, I'm not," roared the prisoner hoarsely.

"He's got his face and hands stained, but he's Phil Barron all right," clicked Tom Tallant.

"Take him over and wash him, some of you young men," ordered the sheriff, turning to a group of wondering Bountyville boys who had crowded about.

"No, you don't! I won't have it!" roughly protested the captive.

"That's Phil! I know it beyond a doubt, now," declared Tallant decisively. "And Phil always had plenty of spending money, and saved it, usually, until he wanted to spend it on some particular thing, more often an evil purpose of some sort."

"Oh, you miserable liar!" cried the prisoner.

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Tom's face flushed hotly. Before he realized it, his right fist clenched, and he took a step forward.

Sheriff Hayes dashed his arm up.

"What! Are you going to strike a helpless prisoner, Major Tallant?" demanded the peace officer.

"Thank you, sheriff," Tom answered, falling back and looking heartily ashamed. "I allowed myself to be stung too easily, considering that I have the upper hand here. Phil Barron, under the circumstances, I beg your pardon for that intended blow."

"I'm not Phil Barron; never heard of him," insisted the prisoner, in a voice that plainly was intended to be disguised.

"You take such pains to deny the fact that you must be Barron," observed the sheriff dryly. "Where's your money, by the way?"

"Haven't any," snapped the young man.

"Then I'll look for myself," retorted the peace officer. Searching the young man's pocket, he brought to light the same roll that had been held out to our hero.

"Eleven dollars," muttered the sheriff, as he counted. "I suppose you must have had a lot more than this, Barron, before you began to distribute it among the rioters?"

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The prisoner remaining obstinately silent, Mr. Hayes commanded:

"Now, take Barron and give his face a good scrubbing. Use all the soap you need, and be careful that he doesn't get a chance to jump over into the harbor."

Within five minutes the stain had been very well scrubbed off the prisoner's face. It was no longer possible for him to deny that he was Phil Barron, and a very angry and frightened Phil he was at that.

"What on earth made you mix up among the rioters?" insisted the sheriff, looking tremendously puzzled.

"Oh, I wanted some excitement," Phil answered gruffly.

"Humph! Do you call it excitement to stand up in front of a file of rifles to be shot at? Have you any idea, Barron, how near this company was to firing ball cartridges into the crowd?"

"I wish, now, that they had," Phil replied, with a crestfallen air, "and that one of the bullets had hit me!"

"Yes, you must be willing to sell yourself pretty cheaply just now," grunted the peace officer.

"See here, Mr. Hayes, you're not going to

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do anything to me?" Phil demanded eagerly.
"You'll let me go, of course?"

"Do you think so," mocked the sheriff,
"after we've caught you as one of the ring-leaders of a mob that was being egged on to start fatal fighting in the streets of this town?"

"But I was only doing it for fun!"

"If inciting murderous riot is your idea of fun, young Barron, then you need to have a rousing," uttered the sheriff grimly. "Have your prisoner taken where the others are, Major Tallant."

"Don't do that, Mr. Hayes! Don't!" Phil begged tremulously. "Don't disgrace me!"

"I can't disgrace you," retorted the sheriff. "You've done that trick for yourself, young man!"

"But think of my father! My mother!"

"It was your place to have thought of them. No, young man; since you've been caught as you have, you'll have to learn the folly and wickedness of it all by some practical experience that's ahead of you."

"Wh-hat do you mean?" Phil faltered.

"Why, you'll have to go before a court and explain or take the consequences."

"My father will never allow that!" raged Phil Barron.

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"Your father will have precious little to do with it, my boy," muttered the sheriff. "Don't imagine that just because your father is a very wealthy man you are privileged to break any laws. But speaking of your father, I'll try to telephone him that you're here, if you wish."

"No, no, no!" shuddered Phil. "Don't do that. To-morrow will be soon enough for that. Tom Tallant, you've played me a lot of mean tricks. This last one is the meanest of all. Are you delighted?"

"I'm heartily sorry, Phil," Tom declared promptly and earnestly. "If the decision rested with me, I am afraid I'd show how sorry I am by letting you go."

"Why can't you talk like that, Mr. Hayes?" pleaded Phil miserably.

Tom glanced at the sheriff with a look that backed up the prisoner's appeal, but Mr. Hayes was obdurate.

"No," he said shortly. "I'm sheriff of the county, and it isn't my business to turn prisoners loose, except at the order of the court. Take Barron away and lock him up with the other prisoners."

Phil was escorted by a young soldier, but Tom stepped to his other side. After they had

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gone up the gang plank to the schooner that served as a prison ship, Tom whispered:

“Keep your nerve up, Phil. It was a fearful thing you did——”

“Now, you’re not going to preach, are you?” sneered Barron.

“No; I’m going to say that, if I can persuade the sheriff in any proper way, I’ll get him to agree to let you go—that is, if you’ll give your solemn word to keep out of any further mischief among the rioters.”

“Oh, won’t I keep away from them, though!” murmured Phil.

The private who was acting as guard drew away a few yards.

“What on earth made you go among them, Phil?”

“If I tell you,” muttered Barron suddenly, “you won’t do a thing to get me clear of this.”

“Yes, I will—all I can!”

“What do you suppose made me do it?”

Tom wondered for a few moments. Then he suddenly broke forth:

“Phil, did you try to stir up trouble over here just so that our fellows would be overwhelmed and driven from the field?”

“Yes, that was about it,” young Barron confessed miserably.

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"What made you think of doing such a fearful thing as that?"

"Oh, I was sick and tired of hearing the Bountyville boys lauded to the skies all the time. When I found out this afternoon that your fellows were breaking camp, or that a part of them were, I was crazy to know what it all meant. I got into cit. clothes, left my own camp, and rode in the baggage car of the same train that brought your fellows down to Westmont. Then I found out what was in the wind and slipped over this way on a bicycle as soon as I could get the wig, the stain, and some old clothes together."

Phil spoke with a sob catching in his voice. He was badly frightened and repentant or he would not have confessed so much. Even his sense of shame appeared to have fled in the utter rout that had seized his soul.

"Now, you won't try to get me off. I know you won't," he added shaking.

"Yes, I will. I'll do my best," Tom agreed readily. "But, oh, Phil, have you any idea what mischief you came near doing with the rum that you helped those infuriated rioters to buy? We were on the point of firing into the crowd with ball cartridges."

"Not really?"

"Upon my word."

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"Ugh!" shivered Phil Barron. "I didn't suppose you had a thing but blank cartridges."

"Well, I shall have to leave you. You'll have to go down among the prisoners now. But I'll do my best—really, Phil!"

Tallant pressed the other youth's hand. Phil clung to that hand for half a minute with the grasp of a drowning man on a straw.

CHAPTER XXIII

TWO-O'CLOCK-IN-THE-MORNING COURAGE

AFTER midnight things quieted down in Westport. The rioters were little in evidence, though now and then two or three men appeared out on the street at some distance from the docks. Few lights shone from the houses. There were no mutterings of trouble. The Bountyville boys, now encamped in a vacant field across from the docks, might have been on a military school junket for all that appeared of lawlessness in the little town.

Only the strength of the guard showed that it was not an ordinary camp. A sergeant and eight sentries were out on post at a time. Two of these sentries were guarding the schooners, the one on the prison ship doing double duty. One sentry paced at the land end of the dock, another before the camp, while the others were distributed up the street for a short distance. In addition to these, the balance of half the company at a time held themselves in readiness, and awake,

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on the dock. Tom and Ruhlmann had commanded the guard up to one o'clock in the morning; now, the commissioned officers on duty were Dick and Potter.

Every one of the young sentries was as alert as if he alone were on duty and responsible for the security of Mr. Page's property at the docks. Sheriff Hayes had impressed upon the Bountyville boys the fact that they were, for the time being, real soldiers of the State, by authority of the governor and by requisition of the sheriff of the county.

The young soldier, Dawson, who had been struck by a bullet and had had the injury to his leg dressed by a Westport doctor, who had smuggled himself into the camp, was comfortable and in no danger. Young Rafferty and Lambert, struck by flying stones, were on duty again, though aching where they had been hit.

Private Elbert was the sentry farthest up the street on the tour that was to end at two o'clock. Several times he had seen, or thought he had seen, shadows farther up the street. From time to time he had challenged without response, and then in each case the sergeant of the guard had hurried up the street, only to return and report that he had been unable to discover any prowler.

"Halt!" rang Elbert's sharp challenge now.

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"Oh, it's nothing," smiled Captain Dick.
"The poor fellow must have bad eyes. He's been
seeing shadows ever since he went out on post."

Private Elbert, however, took a decidedly
different view this time. They were not shadows
at which he was gazing.

Three men were coming slowly and abreast
down the street. The middle one appeared to be
intoxicated, the other two helping him. They
came on ignoring the sentry's challenge.

"Halt!" called Elbert again.

But the men continued to advance.

"Halt!" That was the third hail, as required
by military regulations.

Elbert brought his rifle to his shoulder,
sighted, and—

Crack! A bullet hissed up the street, flying
not far from the outer prowler's head. The
three men stopped, huddled in a compact mass.

"Halt and answer! Who's there?" de-
manded Elbert.

The sergeant of the guard came running up,
followed by Lieutenant Potter.

But the three men vanished into a doorway.
A moment later, and ere any of the guards could
reach them, the three had disappeared into a
house, banging the door behind them.

From a darkened window near by a revolver

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was discharged, the bullet passing Potter and flattening itself against a brick wall. Curses came from other buildings near by—then, from unseen throwers on a roof-top, sped such a volley of stones that it was a miracle that any of the guard party escaped injury.

“Turn out the guard!” commanded Captain Dick quietly, and, at its head, went up the street at the double quick.

Those already on the ground had halted in the middle of the street, with rifles at ready, watching for any assailants who might show themselves.

Over all that part of the little town rose a hoarse murmur that soon grew to the proportions of a din. The rioters, then, had been hiding—not sleeping.

“So they’re going to make trouble for us after all?” growled Captain Dick. “Good enough! Those fellows will find us ready for them!”

At the farther end of the street soon appeared a body of a hundred men or more, tightly packed, and looking as if hesitating whether or not to advance upon the little body of junior soldiery.

“Lieutenant,” said Dick, turning to Potter, “my compliments to Major Tallant, and inform him of the state of affairs.”

Potter sped away while Dick stood looking up

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the street, an eerie feeling creeping over him as he tried to peer through the darkness at that early hour in the morning. So long as the men farther up the street did not attempt to advance, Captain Dick had no orders that covered the case.

"But if they get bolder and try to head this way—" quivered Henderson. "Whew!"

He had thrown his guard party across the street without especial formation, but each young soldier had a cartridge in his rifle, with the bolt slipped down upon it.

While Potter was in Tom's tent awaking our hero, there suddenly came four distinct flashes from a roof top not far away.

"Elbert, Vance, Smith, Douglas, fire back at them!" commanded Dick.

Three of the bullets had whizzed by the young soldiers, the fourth being unaccounted for.

Major Tom Tallant, just aroused and listening to Potter, heard the two sets of shots.

"Tell the bugler to sound the alarm!" cried Tom, leaping for his sword and belt and buckling it on. Like the others off duty, he had slept in his clothes.

Ta-rata-ta-ra-ta! Almost at the first notes of that spirited call, coming in the wake of the shots, Bountyville's young soldiers came tumbling

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from their tents, some of them so sleepy that they forgot their arms.

"Fall in under arms!" Tom's voice rang sternly. "Be ready for the assembly on the jump! Lieutenant, my compliments to Captain Henderson, and direct him to use his own judgment about falling back on the camp."

As Potter raced away, Ruhlmann, the bugler, keeping close to him, formed the remaining half of the company in columns of twos, marching them halfway to the docks, so that they still guarded the camp as well.

Some of them were shaking a bit it must be admitted. All of them were anxious. There was something decidedly uncanny and startling about being summoned from their cots at this darkest hour of the early morning to face they knew not what.

No more shots had been fired by the rioters, but the din of their yells from various points was in the air. It was plain enough that the whole disturbance had been but slumbering, concealed, through the later part of the night.

Just in the nick of time Tom remembered that Sheriff Hayes was the real and responsible commander here. Both that official and his deputy had slumbered on, aboard one of the schooners, through this first excitement. Tom sent a soldier

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messenger to arouse Mr. Hayes. That gentleman came on the run, rubbing his eyes.

"What's the trouble, Major Tallant?" he demanded.

"We've been fired on, and a mob is gathering. I am awaiting a further report than that, sir."

"Confound those pesky foreigners! They haven't had a real lesson yet," growled the sheriff. "They *shall* have it, if they can't come to their senses at once!"

Up the street the din was growing. It had swollen to an angry roar of defiance, though those of the rioters who were in the street had as yet made no move forward.

"Major, you'd better leave ten men to guard the docks and schooners," directed Sheriff Hayes. "Instruct them to shoot anyone who attempts to come near without proper authority. Then march the rest of your command up the street. I will go with you."

Deputy Delman running up at this moment, Mr. Hayes instructed him to remain at the docks. Then Tom's party and the sheriff marched up the street.

"What is happening, captain?" Tom inquired, as he reached his subordinate.

"Nothing now, except what you see," Dick

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Henderson replied, saluting, after which he pointed up the street.

"Form your men, major, and march up to where that mob is collecting," ordered the sheriff.

"Hadn't I better double the sentries and leave them behind, sir?"

"If you think best."

This Tom quickly did. Then with his officers and some thirty "enlisted men," he formed in one platoon front and advanced.

"Keep back dere, or you wish you had!" warned a voice from the mob.

"Disperse, or there'll be blood shed!" roared Sheriff Hayes. "Run as fast as you can if you don't want to be fired on."

Only jeers and yells of defiance came back by way of answer.

"This looks nasty," muttered the sheriff, at our hero's side.

"Shall we try a bayonet charge on them, sir?"

"Do you think you can break the rascals that way?"

"I don't know, sir, until I try."

"Try it, then."

Tom halted his platoon, giving them orders to fix bayonets. It took longer than it had done the afternoon before. There were no cowards in

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the thin little line of junior soldiers, but at this hour and fresh from their beds, some of the Bountyville boys were unduly nervous.

Then Tom gave the order for the bayonet charge. He went with the line, at the right, the other young officers just behind the charging line, and Sheriff Hayes just at our hero's heels. If the line was a bit irregular, what did it signify? Napoleon once declared that the rarest form of valor is the two-o'clock-in-the-morning courage.

The charging line was less than a hundred yards from the mob when Sheriff Hayes caught the gleam of many revolver barrels ahead.

“Stop!” roared the peace officer.

“Platoon, halt!” Tom responded promptly.

The charging line stopped in its tracks. Few of the fellows were sorry. It seemed unearthly to go ahead, running into and prodding even rioters at this early morning hour.

“Will you men disperse?” bellowed Sheriff Hayes hoarsely.

“No!” came back an answer, followed by a chorus of jeers.

“We’re going to clear the street of you fellows, one way or another,” stormed the peace officer.

“Come on!” came the jibing answer.

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"I'll give you until I count ten to disperse!" warned Sheriff Hayes.

"Why don't you come on?" was the only answer he got, followed by a volley of taunting remarks.

"One, two, three, four—" And so on the sheriff counted until he had uttered the numeral "ten!"

A volley of laughter mixed with coarse remarks and yells in a foreign tongue was all the sheriff got for his pains. He mopped his forehead in his perplexity over the mob's stubbornness.

"There's nothing else for it, major," he grunted. "Give 'em a volley."

"Platoon, load!" was Tom Tallant's instant response. "Aim!"

At that there was a surging in the mob. As the rioters had gathered at the crossing of two streets, several of these vanished either north or south.

The command to fire trembled on our hero's lips. He turned to glance at Sheriff Hayes.

"Shall I do it, sir?"

"Will you men take one last chance to get away with your lives?" demanded the peace officer huskily.

Seeing the young soldiers standing there with

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their rifles still aimed, more of the rioters fled.

Tom ordered hammers lowered on the bolts. Sheriff Hayes stepped forward up the street.

"Why won't you fellows get enough sense to realize that the law is going to be upheld whether you want it so or not?" he demanded.

"You get back, or there will be a new sheriff in the county!" sneered one of the rioters in broken English. Seeing several revolvers pointed his way, Mr. Hayes turned his back on the mob, walking without undue haste, back to the line of young soldiers.

"It's no use, major! You'll have to give them a real volley. Now!" commanded the sheriff.

"Platoon, ready!"

As they saw the movement with the rifles of the young soldiers, more of the rioters were discreet enough to vanish. Yet still some two-score remained blocking the street.

"Aim! Fire!" came Tom's voice huskily.

The two-o'clock-in-the-morning courage proved itself at the crisis.

At the command the volley rang out as one rifle shot.

Then, as the young soldiers lowered their pieces, they stood there, shaking indeed, for the entire party of rioters had fallen, and now lay

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in the street. It was a ruse, however, not a disaster. The remaining rioters had planned to throw themselves down at the word "aim."

They had got their lesson, too. As they lay there, hugging the ground, these remaining members of the mob heard a score and a half of military bullets hiss by over their bodies.

"You not shoot no more!" came an appealing voice from among the prostrate ones.

"Will you men promise to respect the law and the State troops, then?" demanded Sheriff Hayes.

"Yes, yes! Oh, sure!" came the quick promise.

"Then prove it by lying where you are until I come to you."

Turning to our hero, Mr. Hayes directed:

"Major, march your men to within twenty yards of where those rascals are lying. If one of them attempts to rise and run, shoot him! Forward!"

Tom repeated the last order, halting his men some sixty feet from the rioters lying in the street.

"Now, you men lie just as you are. I'm going among you and take your weapons away!" called the sheriff. Attended by Henderson and Potter, the peace officer stepped in and out among

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the men. Some of them protested, but all submitted to the deprivation of their weapons—a motley collection of pistols, dirks, and ammunition.

It took some fifteen minutes to complete the work, but all that time the young Bountyville soldiers stood by with loaded rifles to enforce the majesty of the law to any extremity.

"Now, I'm not going to arrest you men this time," wound up the sheriff. "There won't be any need to, for the rioting is over here. Do you understand?"

"Yes," came the response from a few of the men who spoke English.

"Now, remember that we'll shoot up the street to-night at any man who shows himself. You can get among your own crowd without crossing this street after you leave here. Now go!"

Meekly enough these rioters rose and shuffled off in either direction along the cross street.

"The back of this trouble is broken, major," murmured the sheriff, going over to Tom. "March your men back, all except the sentries. Wait fifteen minutes for new trouble to start. If it doesn't, then let your reserves go to their cots again."

As Sheriff Hayes had predicted, there was no more trouble that night. In the morning the peace

TWO-O'CLOCK-IN-THE-MORNING COURAGE

officer went through the street, past little groups of men, sullen but not troublesome, and telephoned to Westmont.

Two hours later a line of wagons appeared on the crest of the hill beyond Westport. Half of the Bountyville boys under Captain Dick went forward to meet and escort the new arrivals. In the wagons were a force of laborers ready to unload the schooners. It was a long line of wagons and trucks, for Mr. Page had planned to unload both schooners and get all his materials in one trip.

As Tom waited on the dock beside Mr. Hayes, he turned to that gentleman suddenly:

“Mr. Hayes, are you going to keep Phil Barron a prisoner?”

“Why not? He seems to think that because he has a wealthy father he can do as he pleases. Why not keep him and put him through the mill of complaint in a criminal court?”

“I had hopes that you would turn him loose this morning.”

“Why do you hope that, Major Tallant?”

“Well, because, Mr. Hayes, it was through his enmity for me that he was led into this scrape. He wouldn’t have tried it if it hadn’t been for that enmity. It’s a fearful scrape, and it’s likely to break all peace between his father and himself.

BOUNTYVILLE BOYS

It'll just about wind up his last chance to amounting to anything in life."

"It's a slim chance, anyway," grumbled the sheriff. "I know that young man well and don't think much of him, either."

"I feel a little bad about his case since I was the one who pounced on him and brought him in," Tom persevered.

"And so, as you caught him, you think you ought to be allowed to turn him loose, eh?" demanded Sheriff Hayes, eying the young major shrewdly.

"I told Phil last night that I would do my best to save him from disgrace with his father."

"But his father will hear of this affair most certainly."

"He may not if Phil is released before the wagons and the laborers get here. Can you consistently let Barron go, Mr. Hayes?"

"If I do," hesitated the peace officer, "then it will be only because you ask it."

"Then I do ask it, sir," proclaimed Tom Tallant boldly.

"But your comrades will spread the story, anyway."

"They won't whisper it if I ask them not to. The Bountyville boys are a pretty close crowd, sir."

TWO-O'CLOCK-IN-THE-MORNING COURAGE

"Well, come along," murmured the sheriff.

They boarded the schooner, and the sentry was instructed to lower the ladder that Phil might come up on deck. He came, a meek, woe-begone looking object of humanity. His eyes were turned deckward.

"Barron, if you were turned loose could you actually behave yourself after this?"

"Yes, sir," Phil answered meekly.

"Do you give me your strongest word that you *will* behave yourself at all times?"

"Oh, yes, sir," Phil promised, looking up eagerly, not at our hero, but only at the sheriff.

"Then I'm going to let you go, young man, but bear in mind that no consideration of your wealthy father, nor any importance that you may imagine attaches to yourself, has anything to do with my decision. You owe your release from arrest solely to Major Tallant, who tells me that he promised to try to secure your release. Tom Tallant is so much of a man that I would do far more than this for him when possible. As for you, Barron, while you may do something better in life, and I hope you will, so far you've never shown yourself anything but a sneak. Now, hustle away before I change my mind!"

"I can stop long enough to speak to Tom Tallant, can't I?" asked Phil eagerly.

BOUNTYVILLE BOYS

"Yes, if he cares to talk to you."

"I want to thank you. That's all now," said Phil, holding out his right hand, hesitatingly.
"Will you shake hands?"

"Why, of course, Phil," smiled Tom, grasping the other's hand. "And now, don't talk about the trouble here, and I promise you that none of our fellows will either. Good-by and good luck!"

Young Barron promptly vanished through the town's back streets.

CHAPTER XXIV

A COWARD'S THRILL

"**M**RE. PAGE's wagons are on their way back, escorted by the Bountyville boys!"

That was the news that flew through Westmont early in the afternoon. Everyone in the town was excited over the doings of the last twenty-four hours. The youngsters had proved themselves made of the soldier's stuff, and Westmont was proud of her sons.

Of course the news brought out crowds to greet the wagon trains and its escort. The promised welcome for the Bountyville boys looked likely to assume the proportions of a gala occasion as the groups on the main street grew in size. It was a long wait, but at last some one called:

"Here are the wagons!"

A cheer went up while women and girls got their handkerchiefs out ready to wave. Then as the long line of wagons drew nearer, the crowds showed their surprise.

"Where are the Bountyville boys?"

BOUNTYVILLE BOYS

Where, indeed? The line of wagons came on without a sign of military pomp or display.

Some Westmontites more curious than the others ran to meet the advancing wagons.

"Where are the young soldiers?" answered the driver of the foremost wagon, laughing. "Are you all out to see them? Humph! They've stolen a march on you then. They weren't needed after we got out of Westport, so young Tallant ran his crew up the back road to the armory. They've reached there by this time."

And so it proved. Hot and dusty, Tom had marched his provisional company into the armory grounds near the school. There were only Hiram Page, his superintendent, and two of his foremen to greet them.

As Tom halted his company and saluted Mr. Page with a flourish of his sword, that old gentleman called cheerily:

"No, I'm not going to make a speech, young men. All I have to tell you is that I'm satisfied that your soldierly training hasn't been wasted on you. You've stood the test as well as ever I could have expected or desired. I'm satisfied with you, which ought to go further than saying that I'm proud of you. Major, when you dismiss your men tell them to take the remainder of the day as a home furlough. To-morrow

A COWARD'S THRILL

morning you will all return to your camp in the hills, there to finish the summer encampment."

"Unless we have more trouble over at Westport," smiled the superintendent.

"Which I pray most earnestly that we won't have," responded Mr. Page.

Again saluting, Tom turned to give the order to break ranks. Arms were stored in the armory, after which the young men began to depart for their homes.

"Tom," said Mr. Page, calling our hero to him, "over in my stable if you want him you'll find Sultan. You know what a good saddle horse he is. Make use of him this afternoon if you have any calling to do and care to go in saddle."

Tallant thanked Mr. Page most heartily, for, ardent horseman that he was, it was a treat to have Sultan out for an afternoon. Tom went over, saddling and riding forth at once. His first visit, of course, was to his home.

One young man in Westmont was naturally anything but happy over *his* return from Westport. To be sure, Phil Barron was wholly glad to be free of the tight clutches of the law, but he was utterly miserable over the prospect that his father would soon hear of this latest disgrace.

On his cautious return to the Barron mansion,

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Phil learned that his father and mother were both out of town, the time of their return being uncertain.

"I'd rather have it over with at once," muttered Phil, as he lounged discontentedly through the house. "Of course, there's going to be a jolly good row if it all comes out, and I don't see how its coming out can be helped for long. Confound Tom Tallant! Why did he have to single me out in that crowd when no one else was after me? I wonder if he really suspected who I was!"

For some time Phil was more or less under the influence of his recent gratitude to our hero. Still he could not avoid the conclusion that he would have escaped arrest altogether, if it hadn't been for Tallant.

"I wonder if I could make the guv'nor believe that I was in that crowd for the sole purpose of learning just how the military serve at a riot? Of course, as to the money, no one here in Westmont can really prove that I gave those foreigners money for liquor."

At first Barron was hopeful over that new line of defense. His hope was short-lived, however.

"The guv'nor is getting fairly used to my line of excuses for being in scrapes," thought Phil,

A COWARD'S THRILL

with a shiver. "I'll have to get up something decidedly out of the old line—something wholly unlike me, I guess—if I am to have any luck at all with Barron, senior."

"Telegram for you, Mr. Philip," reported a manservant, coming forward with a yellow envelope. Phil tore the envelope open to read this message from Major Carson:

"If you're absent from camp and home, unless by your father's express permission, I direct you to return to camp at once."

"Oh, the major can go hang!" uttered Phil disrespectfully, as he twisted the telegram up in a ball and dropped it in one of the pockets of the suit that he had donned on reaching home. "I've got a bigger mess of trouble on hand than any old retired army major can put up for me."

Then the grim thought went through young Barron's mind:

"Army major? It was just the boy major of a school battalion that put me down at the very bottom of this present pack of trouble. A major of young tin soldiers at that. No; they're not tin soldiers, though, by Jove! I suppose they'll get a sickening hero reception now for at least a week to come."

At a little after noon the despondent, restless

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young heir of the Barrons lunched in solitary state.

"What are you thinking of, Parkins?" he asked, finding that the man who had been waiting on him was eying him intently.

"Oh, nothing much, sir. That is, Mr. Philip, I was thinking what a very fortunate young man you are, sir."

"Humph! A precious lot you know about it," grumbled Phil. "Do you mind leaving the room, now?"

"No, sir; of course not, sir."

Somehow that inconsequential remark by the servant annoyed and enraged Phil. He fumed as he went on with his meal, spoiling more food than he was eating. In that frame of mind his wrath against our hero began to grow.

"It doesn't make any difference if Tallant did get me out of the sheriff's clutches, he was the one that got me in there first. Hang Tom Tallant!"

By and by Phil's dejection took the form of a restlessness that could not be controlled. He felt that a trip in his father's big touring car, with his own hand at the speed lever, would do more good than anything at present. He was under orders from his father never to take the car out without the chauffeur. But just now young Bar-

A COWARD'S THRILL

ron wanted no company. He threw open the garage doors, started the engine of the automobile, and drove out and off the grounds.

"Seeing what I'm in for, this can't get me in any worse trouble, anyway," Phil reflected almost savagely, as he drove down the street.

Now that he was under way, he found that great speed would not comfort him so he drove slowly. Ahead he espied Vance and Elbert, happily back from Westport and looking very trig and soldierly in their khaki uniforms that had at least seen "active service." The two glanced stiffly at Phil, and away again without sign of recognition. Young Barron sniffed angrily. As he went by he turned to glance after the young soldiers. The pair were laughing.

"Oh, of course, they're just enjoying my scrape!" quivered Phil furiously. "It's just meat and drink for them! Confound the whole outfit—Tom Tallant most of all!"

Once in this frame of mind, it was easy for young Barron to conjure up hateful thoughts at utter variance with his frame of mind at parting with our hero that morning.

"I'd like to cut the whole thing and never see Westmont or any of its people again!" he raged within himself. "Oh, wouldn't I just like to clear out after leaving some trail behind me that would

BOUNTYVILLE BOYS

make the people of this silly town know what I think of them all!"

Gripping the speed lever tightly while this was passing through his mind, Phil almost unconsciously threw the lever forward. The powerful car shot ahead under the new impetus. Phil was traveling at a law-defying speed, but he did not once think of the fact.

Ahead, down the road, young Barron espied a lumbering, old-fashioned closed family carriage that he recognized as belonging to two spinster ladies of Fordham. Their carriage was headed the same way that he was going, and on the same side of the street.

Phil slowed down a bit that he might take no chances in passing them. Then, with a sudden start, he descried Tom Tallant down the street a bit coming toward him on splendid Sultan at a lope.

"That's the fellow that caused all the new trouble!" glowed Phil resentfully, though with a miserable realization that he was lying to himself. "Now, if I turn out suddenly behind the carriage and meet Tallant on his side of the street——"

Phil's face whitened. He knew it was a dastardly thought, but in that insane moment he longed to do something dastardly.

A COWARD'S THRILL

"I needn't hit him too hard—but Tom Tallant with a leg crippled wouldn't be a very fine major for the battalion!"

It was a fearful thought. As if afraid he would fail in this cowardice, Phil Barron took a sudden turn on the steering wheel to come out behind the carriage and strike Sultan and Tom Tallant.

CHAPTER XXV.

LAST WORDS

It was all the evil impulse of a moment—not a deliberate plan.

The thought had flashed through Phil's brain in an instant. The turning of the wheel in order to collide with Tom and Sultan was the next act.

All too late Tom Tallant realized his peril. He threw the horse back to its haunches, but there was not time to turn to get out of the way.

Just as swiftly as Phil had turned the steering wheel for the collision he now twisted it the other way, jamming the speed lever back hard. He swerved. Bump! The touring car crashed into a large elm at the curb not far behind the carriage.

With the force of that impact Phil was thrown out into the street. The touring car with reversed engine darted crazily across the street backward, collided with another large tree, bounded away, and then stood still, dismantled.

Sultan reared and plunged. For a few mo-

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ments Tom Tallant had all he could do to quiet the splendid animal. Then, slipping from saddle and tying the horse to a fence, he ran to where Phil Barron was sitting up looking half dazed.

"Are you much hurt, Barron?" asked Tom anxiously.

"No," was the brief answer.

"Try to get up on your feet and let me see. Here, I'll help you—so."

Phil got upon his feet, taking a few steps.

"Oh, you're all right," cried Tom cheerily.

There had been the report of a little explosion and now the handsome touring car was seen to be in flames. Tom turned to glance at it.

"Too infernally bad," he muttered. "We can't save the car, Phil."

"No, let her burn," retorted Barron dully.

"My, but that was a close squeak, Phil!" Tom went on. "I thought sure you were going to run me down."

"That was what I set out to do," Phil admitted quietly.

"Eh? What? Oh, you don't mean that, Phil. You're excited—upset."

"I meant to run you down, Tom. That was what I turned out from behind the carriage for."

The carriage had gone on, its deaf old driver and the women occupants unaware of the disaster

BOUNTYVILLE BOYS

that had happened behind them, for Barron had not sounded his horn at turning.

Tom stood gazing, thunderstruck, at his companion.

Then he asked very quietly:

"If you set out to do it, Phil, what made you turn again and smash the car—and risk your own life?"

"Because, short as the instant was, I was ashamed when it flashed over me what a good fellow you are, Tom—what a good fellow you've always been, as I must admit. Rather than cripple you, I was willing to kill myself. My life don't amount to very much anyway, you know," Phil finished, with an awkward grin.

"Why, I'm just beginning to think that it does amount to something!" cried Tallant, as soon as he could master his new astonishment. "Phil, old fellow, won't you shake hands?"

"I'm ashamed to with you, or anyone else that's decent," Barron responded awkwardly.

Yet, as Tom still held out his right hand insistently, Phil did not decline to offer his own.

"Phil, what's the need for all the hard feeling that there has been between us? We're capable of getting on like friends, aren't we, and having a good, straightforward, honest understanding all the time?"

LAST WORDS

"I wish we were," sighed Phil, "but I'm afraid you can't teach an old dog new tricks. Once in a while, at least, I want to be like other fellows, but—but something always seems to get in the way."

"It won't again, I'm sure of that," Tallant retorted heartily, still keeping Barron's hand within his own.

"That's awfully good of you, Tom, but—well, the truth is, I'm afraid of myself more than I am of anyone else."

"Maybe that's because you've always tried to be all-sufficient to yourself," Tom suggested seriously. "No fellow can get along just by himself in the world, Phil. We were put on this globe to get along with each other, and to be of some use to each other. Come out of your shell and be one of us here in Westmont, won't you, Phil? You'll find you can get along with all of our fellows, and that they'll like you, if you give them any decent sort of a chance."

"I guess I can get along with you after this, if you'll let me, after what you know of me," Barron replied, with another wan, sickly smile.

"Oh, you and I can get along famously," Tallant responded. "I'm sure of that, after you've risked your own life sooner than run me down."

"I'd have felt terrible if I had hit you and

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laid you up, Tom—I know I would," Phil protested huskily.

"Of course you would. And everything has turned out all right, except for the automobile. I hope, Phil, you won't get into any serious trouble with your father on account of that car."

They watched the wrecked machine, which was now blazing fast.

"I'll be sure to get into trouble over that," Phil retorted, some of the old, defiant tone coming back into his voice. "You see, I took it against the guv'nor's express orders, and—"

"Well, even that will be all right, too, I'm thinking," declared Tom, "if you can only make your father feel that you see the world through a changed pair of eyes. See here, Phil, if I could only tell him how you wrecked it to avoid running me down, and if we could only manage so that, without falsehood, we could slide over your first intention—"

"Stop right where you are, Tom," begged Phil. "I'll catch it, of course, but don't you believe cowardice has always been one of my faults? I've tried to lie and sneak out of everything that has happened wrong with me, and generally, I've gotten into deeper trouble through that course. Now, I'm going to get reckless, Tom." Phil smiled bitterly. "If my nerve holds out, I'm going to

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the guv'nor and tell him the whole thing—yes, even what happened over at Westport. I'll get myself into a precious lot of trouble, I know; but I'm going to do just what I tell you, this time—and I don't care if I get hanged for it."

Tom could not repress the stare of amazement with which he regarded young Barron. This was so wholly unlike the old Phil that Tallant wanted to rub his eyes and take another look.

"Well, what are you staring at?" demanded Phil, with a reckless laugh. "Are you saying to yourself that I'm only bragging, and that I'll welch and run before the wrath to come?"

"No," Tom responded bluntly. "I'm just a little surprised, that's all."

"I don't wonder," Phil grunted. "I admit that I'm surprised myself, but—well, I'm going to put a chip on my shoulder and meet the guv'nor—"

"Don't!" begged Tom. "Don't think of it."

"Oh, the chip is only to give myself courage. I'll get through with it, and then I'll face whatever music he wants to play for me. I'm sick of being a coward, Tom, and I'm going to put my head down the cannon's throat this time and be done with it."

"I hardly think such an extreme course as

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that will be necessary," drawled a voice very slowly behind them.

Both young men turned with a start. Phil gave a gasp as he found himself looking, abashed, into his father's inquiring eyes.

At a little distance behind the father stood Mrs. Barron.

"There's your car, sir. I took it out and smashed it," Phil spoke up recklessly.

"I know that, and a little more besides," replied the elder Barron. "I heard something just now that so astonished me that I was betrayed into playing the eavesdropper. However, I judge from as much as I had the good fortune to hear that there are other matters near the surface of more importance to me than the loss of the automobile."

There was no anger in Mr. Barron's voice, though the tone was a queer one. Tom thought the manufacturer spoke as if he were trying to prevent himself from being overwhelmed by his own astonishment.

"Yes, I've got a jolly big lot to talk with you about, sir," Phil admitted hurriedly. "Will at home do as well as here on the street?"

"Yes," responded the senior Barron dryly. "You may walk home with your mother and my-

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self, now. On the way we will notify the fire department that this car is burning on a public highway."

"I'll ride to the fire-department house, if you wish, sir," proposed Tom. "I can get there very quickly on Sultan."

"If you will be so good, then," nodded Mr. Barron. "By the way, Tallant, have you time to call at the house presently—say, in a half an hour?"

"Why, yes, sir, if you want me to," Tom answered, in great surprise.

"I shall greatly appreciate it if you will come at that time, Major Tallant."

Tom promised, turned to lift his hat to Mrs. Barron, then busied himself with Sultan.

Tom had intended to avail himself of a standing invitation to call on Grace Ford at her home. But now, when he had performed his errand at the engine house, he concluded that, in view of his new business, the call on the young lady could very well wait for the present.

His way lay by the Ford house, however. Grace and Bessie were on the lawn playing croquet until they caught sight of the young Bountyville major cantering by. Then they signaled him with their mallets, next, running to the gate. Tom drew up, dismounting and greeting them

BOUNTYVILLE BOYS

as he stood erect and soldierly, the bridle hanging from his left arm.

"I had hoped you were going to stop here and pay us a little call," smiled Grace.

"So had I, but I am obliged to lose that pleasure, for Mr. Barron wishes to see me at his house."

"How is Phil?" asked Grace suddenly.

"All right, I guess. And do you know, Miss Grace, he's a first-rate fellow when you really get to know him!"

"I never was acquainted with him," Bessie put in dryly.

Grace divined that there was something new in the air, but was too well-bred to ask any questions. Tom, on the other hand, felt that he was in no position to volunteer any information about Phil's peculiar affairs.

After chatting for a few moments with the girls, Tom bade them good afternoon regretfully, mounted, and rode on.

Phil and his father occupied seats in the middle of the big veranda as our hero rode into the grounds. They were talking earnestly when Tallant first sighted them, but stopped and glanced his way as soon as they heard the sound of Sultan's hoofs.

"Phil, go to the stable with Major Tallant and

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show him where to tie his horse," directed Mr. Barron.

Nor did Phil flush at the command, but came leaping down to the ground. Tom, dismounting, walked beside him as they went around to the rear of the house.

"I'm nearly dead with amazement," uttered Phil slowly. "Had it out with the guv'nor. Seems he heard about all I said to you. He's going to put everything in the by-gone class, too, if I can bring my toes up to a chalk line that will suit him after this."

"I hope you didn't send that chance begging," laughed Tallant.

"Don't think for a moment that I did."

"Then all's well that ends right!"

"It'll all end right if I can keep from being a coward after this," Phil mumbled.

"Why, you're no real coward, and never were, Phil," Tom retorted warmly. "It wasn't cowardice last night that made you stand in the mob at Westport, facing our rifles loaded with ball cartridges."

"But I didn't believe there was anything but blanks in those guns," young Barron admitted honestly.

"Well, no matter what you believed, then. I've seen enough of you, Phil, to know that you're

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not a coward. Shall I tell you what the trouble was, as I see it?"

"Yes, please."

"Well, then, I believe your courage lacked discipline. You know what the finest thoroughbred horse is until it has been trained—treacherous and tricky. You know the trouble with anything, human or lower animal, that hasn't felt the reins of training and discipline? Get a bit of that discipline in you, Phil, and you'll never give anyone reason to call you a coward. Fear is a hundred times worse than any plight that grit ever gets you into. But I'm preaching, and I'm no good at that kind of talk. Which stall shall I put Sultan in?"

They were in the stable now. Phil helped his friend to unsaddle Sultan and tie him. Then, together, they started back for the house.

"My father told me to suggest that we don't mention matters again before him," Phil hinted.

"I'm sure I don't want to," was the ready reply.

So Tom spent only a rather pleasant social hour there with father and son, and Mrs. Barron came out to greet the visitor. Then the elder Barrons withdrew, but not before the manufacturer had taken time to say:

"I hope you'll find your way here frequently



"‘Why, you’re no real coward, and never were, Phil.’”



LAST WORDS

when in town, major. As Phil and yourself both command military organizations, you may find much of common interest to talk about."

Phil was silent most of the time after his parents had gone. He was neither sulky nor ungracious, however, and Tom, feeling that the young man wanted to be alone to think over a few things for himself, took his leave early.

Phil's courage and manliness both took rapid strides forward after that. There were times, of course, when some of the old disposition flashed to the surface. Yet, in the main he stuck to the new purpose. He went promptly back to camp, and after that, through the summer, the Bountyville boys and the Barron cadets mingled much together. The Bountyville boys—"Page's Pets," as Phil had once sneeringly called them—took their cue from their young leader in fraternizing with the rival organization.

Within two weeks after the Westport affair there was another public day at the Bountyville camp, to which the people of Westmont and Fordham were invited.

There were morning drills, in which the Barron cadets did their share of making the affair a success. In the afternoon there was a spirited sham battle in which some of the cadets served with the defense, and others in the attacking lines.

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It is not our purpose, here, to follow the Bountyville boys and their friends further into life. That opportunity may come later on and much more fully than could be done in these closing pages. So we shall take leave of them here in summer camp, learning more and more of the soldier's duties before the autumnal return to the Bountyville school, there to take up again with the still more important duties and responsibilities of the citizen life.

At the close of this particular afternoon's maneuvers Phil Barron left a group of young people to stroll over to Lieutenant Houston's tent. Those who happened to be looking that way saw the army officer step to the entrance and extend his hand most cordially, after which he and the captain from the rival camp disappeared inside.

"What on earth has come over Phil Barron these days?" queried Bessie wonderingly. "He seems almost nice."

"It isn't what has come *over* him, Miss Stanford," Major Tom Tallant replied gravely, "it is what has come *out* in him."

"And what is that, pray?" insisted Bessie.

"The real fellow that was down deep under the surface."

Further talk was cut short by a bugle summons that sent the young soldiers of both organi-

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zations scurrying. Within a few minutes both commands were formed as one battalion, Bountyville boys and Barron Cadets serving this once as one harmonious organization.

The solemn routine of the dress parade was followed. At the end came the boom of a single cannon. The band played "The Star-spangled Banner," while in a devout, almost awed silence, the country's Flag fluttered down to the ground.

The center of the visitors' gaze was a solid line of young men standing at present arms, a wall of steel backed by grit and discipline—mute pledge always that the Flag shall go up again on the morrow.

THE END



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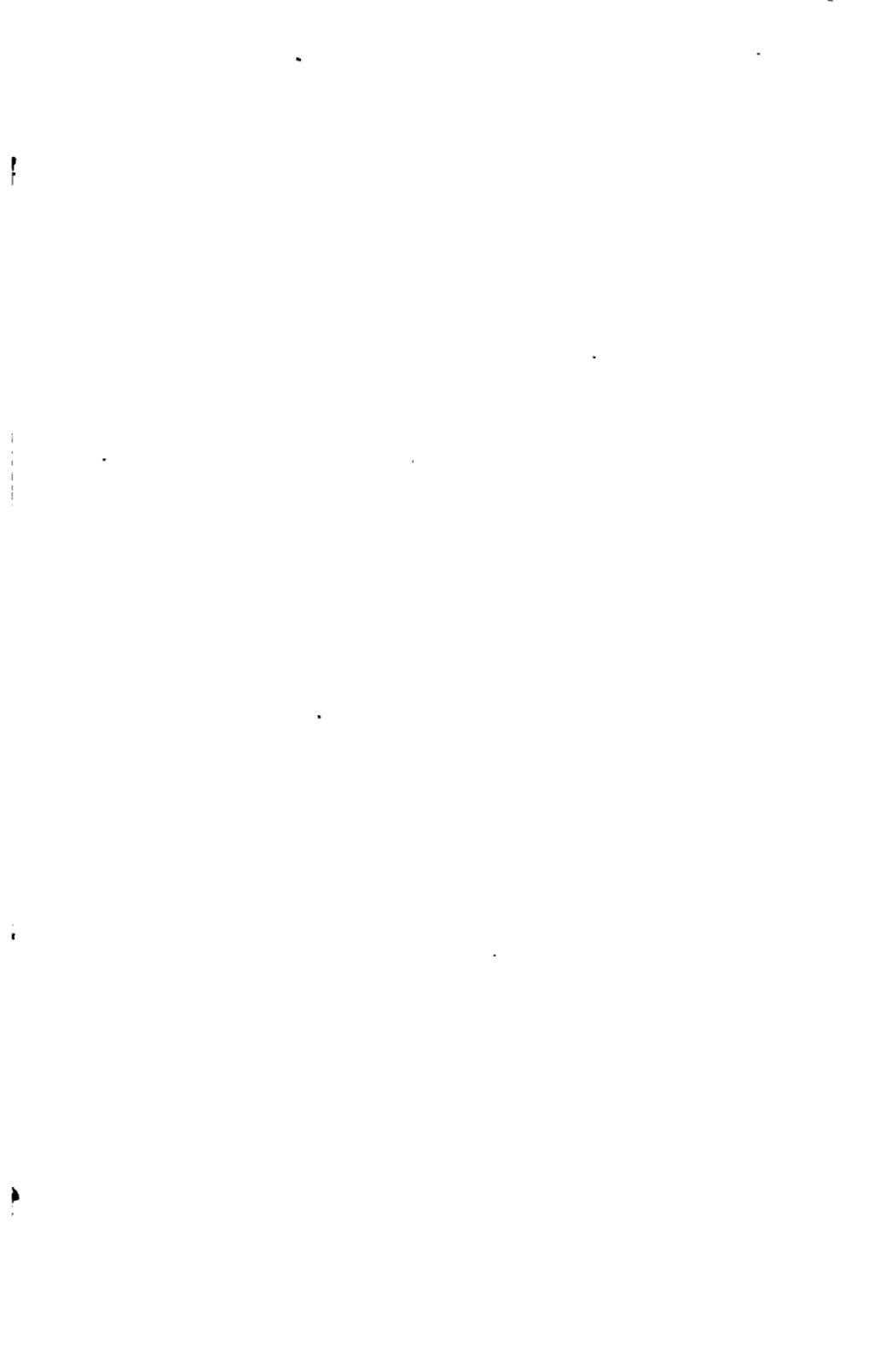
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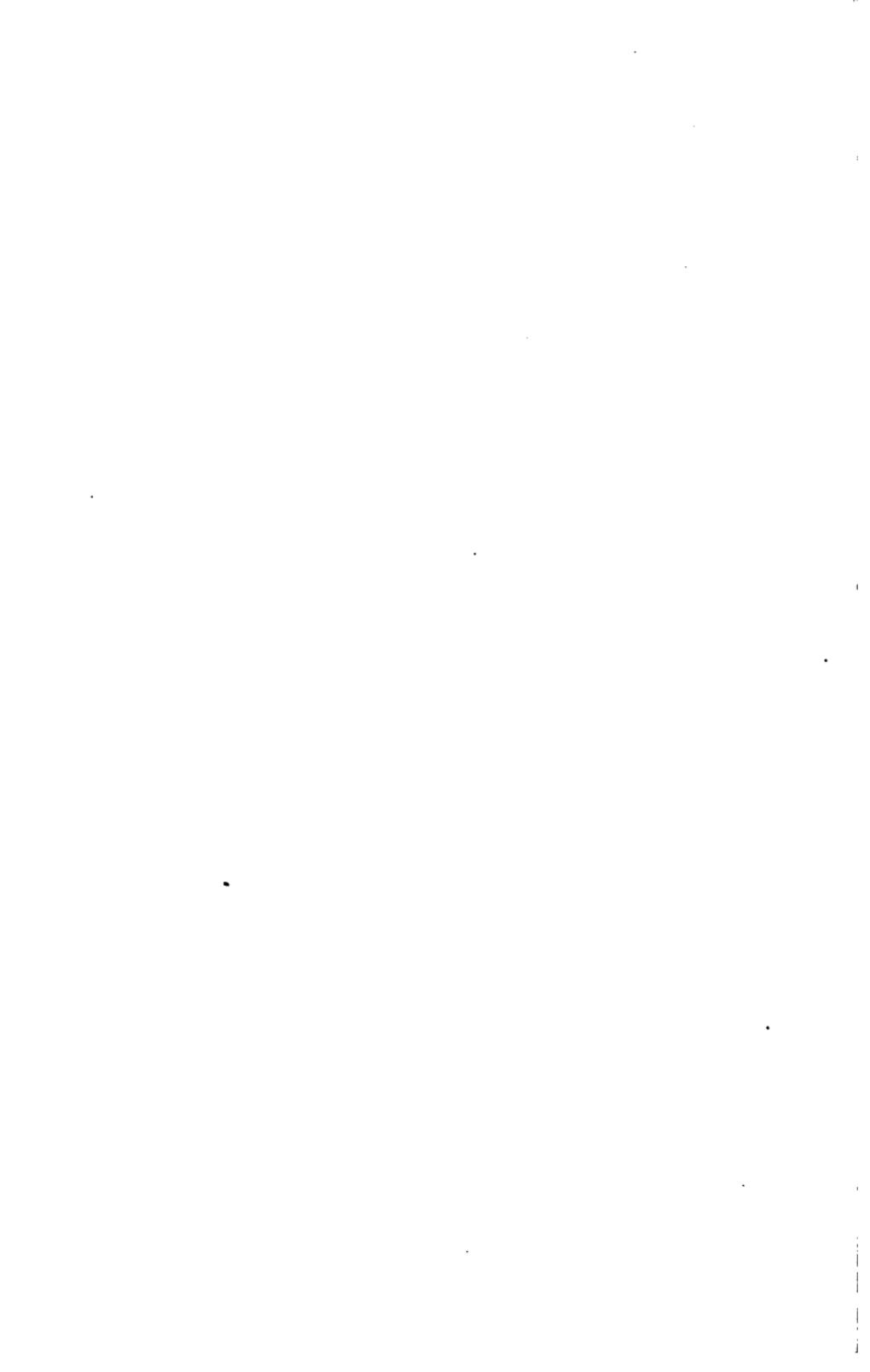
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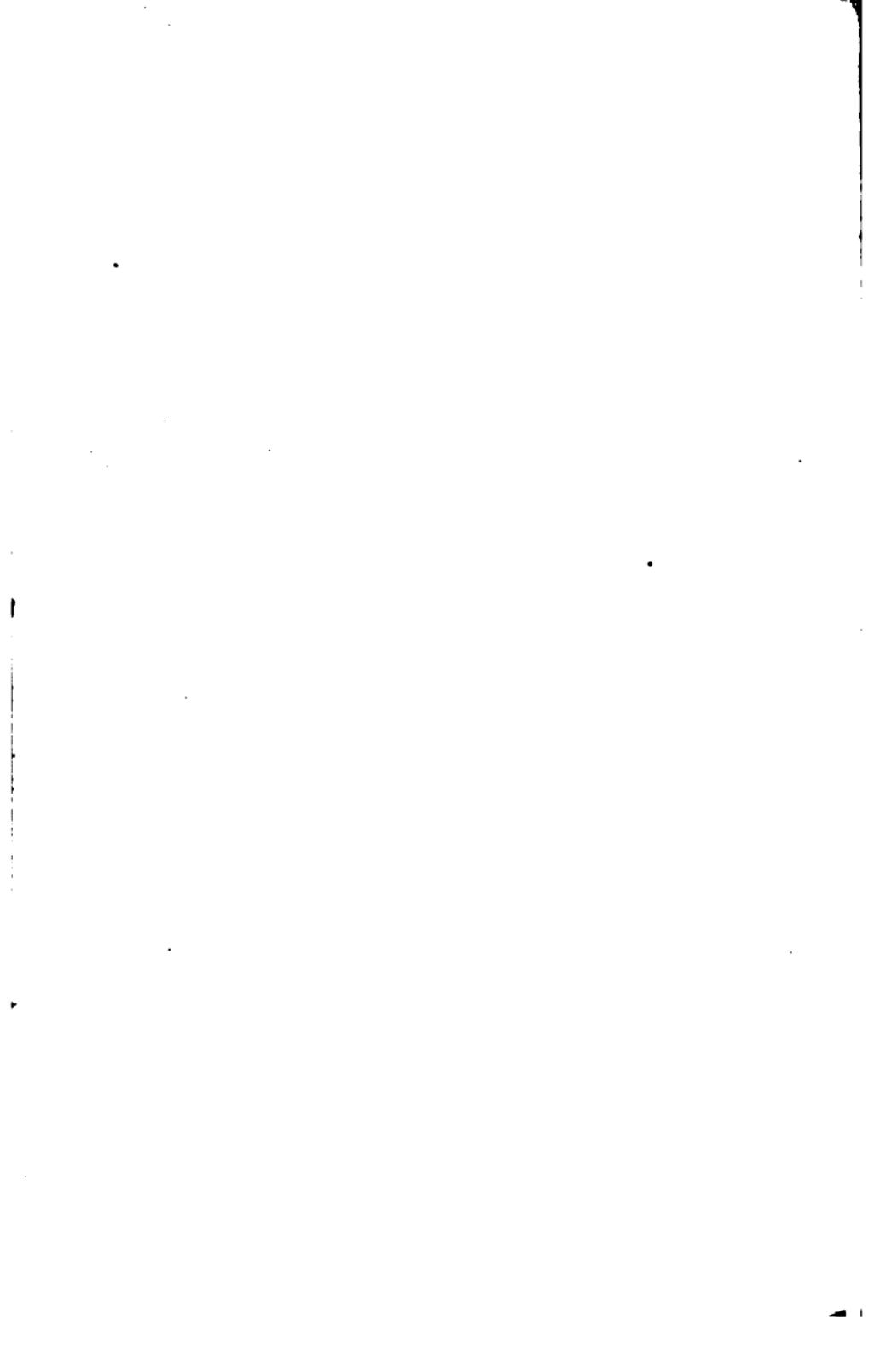
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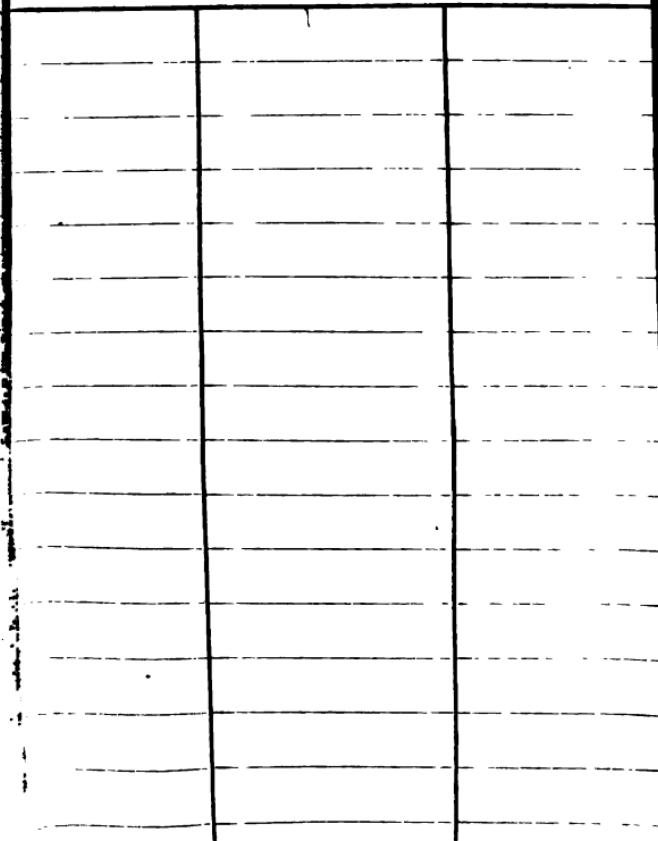






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